Rental Magica Volume 1

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●三田（さんだ） 誠（まこと）

姫路生まれ神戸育ちのO型おひつじ座。理想の花婿になるべく修業中。
この作品用に魔法の文献を集めていたら、たちまち棚が埋まって大変な状態に。
本棚を整理してくれる魔法を探して、怪しげな魔道書と格闘しています。

イラスト／pako
カバーデザイン／中デザイン事務所

レンタルマギカ

～魔法使い、貸します！

三田 誠

角川スニーカー文庫

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三田 誠

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～魔法使い、貸します！

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ASTRAL
Magician Dispatch Company
We rent magicians to meet your needs.

Magician Dispatch Company

Astral

We rent magicians to meet your needs.

魔術特性：

霊樹の末裔

Descendant Of Taliesin

魔力強度 (***Attack***): 3
霊的加護 (***Defence***): 2
術式速度 (***Speed***): 2
呪詛対価 (***Cost***): 2
呪的技術 (***Skill***): 4
危 険 度 (***Danger***): 2

穂波

ケルト魔術課契約社員

古代ヨーロッパに実在した「樫の木の賢者（ドルイド）」の魔術。この魔術は口伝のみで伝えられ、膨大な量の詩歌や知識をすべて暗記しなければならない。

主にヤドリギから呪力を得て、特に月齢六日目、樫の木に生えたヤドリギは最上とされる。

神託や呪歌のほか、神の力を借りて嵐を巻き起こすこともある。

※ケルト魔術

Celtic Magic

The magic of the "Oak Druid" that appeared in ancient Europe.

Only transmitted orally, this magical art consists of many poems and knowledge that must be kept secret.

The user receives spell power from mistletoe, most powerfully on the sixth day from the new moon.

Mistletoe grown on oak has the highest potency.

Aside from chants and spells, the user can borrow God's power to create storms.

ダビデの子にして古代イスラエルの王――ソロモンを祖とする魔術。

魔法円、三角形、五芒星、六芒星。ありとあらゆる象徴（シンボル）を駆使し、かつてソロモン王が使役した七十二の魔神を従える。

だが、象徴と呪文の複雑さもあいまって、その習得は困難を極める。一瞬でも隙を見せれば、魔神は翻って術者を喰らい尽くす。

※ソロモン王の魔術

〈ゲーティア〉首領

アディリシア

魔術特性：

王命の喚起

Evocation Of Solomon

魔力強度 (Attack): 5
霊的加護 (Defence): 1
術式速度 (Speed): 1
呪詛対価 (Cost): 4
呪的技術 (Skill): 5
危 険 度 (Danger): 5

Magic of King Solomon

The magic passed down from Solomon, ancient king of Israel and son of David.

Magic circles, triangles, pentagrams, and Stars of David.

The user employs various symbols to summon the seventy-two demons used by King Solomon.

However, the symbols and spells are incredibly complicated. Its study pushes one's mental capacity to the limit.

If even the tiniest mishap occurs, the demon will turn on its summoner and devour them.

魔術特性：禊（みそぎ）

Absolute Purification

魔力強度 (***Attack***): 1
霊的加護 (***Defence***): 5
術式速度 (***Speed***): 2
呪詛対価 (***Cost***): 2
呪的技術 (***Skill***): 2
危 険 度 (***Danger***): 3

葛城みかん

神道課契約社員

日本では主に信仰としてとらえられているが、その内実は世界でも稀な、「祓い清める」ことに特化した魔術である。

神の名のもと、一切の穢れを祓い、穢れが近寄ることさえ許さない。

ある意味において、最も苛烈な性質の魔術である。

※神道

Shintou

It has many followers in Japan but is one of the rarest forms of magic in the world. Reserved specifically for " purification".

The user allows not the slightest amount of impurity to approach a *kami*.

In a certain way, it is the most rigorous of the magical arts.

We rent
magicians
to meet
your needs.

We rent magicians to meet your needs.

伊庭いつき

失踪した父に代わり、魔法使い派遣会社「アストラル」の社長になる。

葛城みかん

「アストラル」神道課の契約社員。玉串を用いて魔を「祓う」。

猫屋敷蓮

4匹の猫を操る陰陽道の使い手。一見昼行灯だが実力はNo.2。

穂波・高瀬・アンブラー

蒼氷色の瞳を持つ魔法使い。いつきをサポートする。

影崎

事件の裏に出没する〈協会〉の男。謎が多い。

アディリシア・レン・メイザース

「アストラル」の同じく魔術集団「ゲーティア」の首領。魔法と化した父を追う。

Prologue

May, London.

Befitting the city's nickname, "The City of Fog", the boarding school's garden was wrapped in a deep, white mist that morning.

Stepping onto the damp ground in front of the vine-shrouded chapel, Honami Takase Ambler gripped her suitcase.

The familiar face of an old gentleman awaited her at the marble front gate.

"McGregor-sensei."

"Miss Honami. How about at least a goodbye before heading back to your hometown? I was almost deprived of conveying my regards to our best student in recent years."

The fog at their feet completely obscuring his cane, McGregor placed his bowler against his chest.

His Japanese was fluent.

Honami let out a brief laugh and likewise took off her tall, pointed hat. Ice-blue eyes behind thin-rimmed glasses appeared from under her chestnut-hued, semi-short hair. The pure white blouse and tight skirt were dazzling on her innocent, fifteen-year old body.

"I didn't wanna cause any trouble. You're working on your next thesis and all."

"Do not belittle me. How could one be a proper English gentleman if he did not see his pupil off at the gate?"

Stroking his orderly Colman moustache[1], McGregor snorted lightly.

Honami smiled again.

He was that kind of person—showy and childish, but wonderful to be with. When he had suddenly approached Honami and asked her to teach him Japanese , he said, "I have no patience with accents. In any language, a historic, polite dialect most befits a gentleman." Several months later he underwent a total personality shift, right down to the BGM. He even threw out occasional *rakugo*[2] and *kabuki*[3] nuances. Students

unaware of the circumstances even spread rumors that McGregor had finally gone loony.

However, over the last seven years, he was the most helpful person to Honami.

"Well then, how about one last graduation exam from your former teacher?"

"Sure."

She quickly went over her equipment in her mind—it was all right. She had already airmailed all her large magical items, but she could handle the worst with what she had on her. If push came to shove, she still had the thing inside her suitcase.

"Now now, no hesitation. Rather, you seem already sufficiently prepared."

McGregor twirled his cane. If this were an old movie, he would probably start tap dancing.

"In a garden like this, there is no need to worry about spell wave pollution. There is little time before the plane arrives. Let us begin quickly."

Swiftly, he pulled something out of his pocket.

It was a small, ceramic goblet. There was an *ouroboros*[1] carved on the side and a candle lid set on top. It was an object often used in alchemical experiments.

"Your specialty, Egyptian magic?"

"This is your test. Naturally, you meet the aptitude requirements for a student. Thus I have raised the level of difficulty on your behalf."

McGregor casually released the wine cup.

In that instant, there was a change. The cup broke apart with a sound, suddenly billowing smoke, which pushed away the fog and surrounded Honami. As if it had a will of its own, the smoke rushed into her nose and mouth.

"...gh"

"The stuffiness you are feeling is a reaction to the Kabbalah Golem and sulfur, *Tria Prima*."

McGregor observed calmly.

"I shall refrain from writing **EMETH** at this moment. Well then, how well can you handle an enemy with no true form?"

The smoke had already engulfed Honami's body.

According to McGregor's calculations, the smoke monster wouldn't stop until Honami had fainted. Of course he set it not to take her life, but it was possible that he had overlooked something. The smoke was designed to engulf her until all the air have been squeezed from her lungs.

However, the smoke suddenly stopped moving.

"Hm?"

McGregor frowned. A sprig of mistletoe had sprouted from the ground. It bound the smoke despite its shapelessness.

At the same time, a single arrow flew out of the smoke and struck McGregor's cane.

As the cane fell to the ground, it broke cleanly in half length-wise.

The letters **EMETH** were carved inside the cane, which had been held together with varnish, though the letter **E** had been marred by the arrow's impact.

"There's the spell's origin. Lying's the beginning of thievery, Sensei."

"Mistletoe Spear, huh? Again, a classic."

Waving his numbed hand, McGregor, who landed on his backside, gave a wry smile. The smoke had already disappeared. The girl, who was now holding her hand out to him, had no need to open her suitcase. It had been a ploy from the start, but as expected, she hadn't been forced to use her trump card.

"Aaaah, what a waste, what a waste...!"

Throwing off his gentlemanly façade, McGregor struggled to his feet.

"If you stay, we will waive all the research fees, and we will grant you unlimited access to our prized Grimoire. At least another year... no, half a year, please continue your studies here!"

"I'm happy that you value me."

McGregor sullenly crossed his arms.

"You have a lover in Japan or something?" he asked.

Honami's cheek's turned bright red.

"I-It's nothing like that!"

"Oh-ho!" McGregor joyously blew out his cheeks. " That's right, you said you had a childhood friend or something? It would be outside the bounds of gentlemanly behavior to leave it at that. Please tell me of your circumstances."

"Isn't what you're saying more like the reaction of a French gentleman?"

"Bah! It is a meaningless distinction." If any other English gentlemen had heard him, he probably would have been killed. "Well, whatever. For now, I am just happy to see the face of Miss Honami.

"So, where exactly in Japan are you going? Isn't Celtic magic over there quite minor? I heard it's almost all Shinto and Buddhism pulling the strings."

"Yeah... About that... I made the decision to do this ten years ago. Take a look, Sensei."

Smiling mischievously, Honami handed McGregor a single business card.

Printed in sepia-hued letters on lavish paper stock with a crystal watermark was:

<Magician Dispatch Company • Astral

— We rent magicians to meet your needs>

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1. ↑ Type of moustache made famous by English actor , Ronald Colman.
2. ↑ Rakugo is a traditional form of comedic Japanese storytelling.
3. ↑ Kabuki is a traditional form of Japanese theatre.

Chapter 1 - Magicians for Rent!

Part 1

Well then, let us begin a story of magic.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

Iba Itsuki screamed, almost fainting.

Falling on his bottom in an alleyway late at night, the pain coursed through him. A plastic bucket next to him tipped over, splashing the pants of his school uniform with kitchen waste.

"Ah... ah... ah... ah..."

However, completely ignoring that, Itsuki looked up with a dazed expression, pressing the eye patch over his right eye against his face.

He was a boy who looked a little younger than his actual age.

As if to display his personality, his hair was short and wasn't dyed or gelled, and even though it was a holiday, he wore his school uniform. The one exception to his bland appearance was the eye patch covering his right eye like a pirate; though for a young boy to wear it, it came off looking quite ridiculous.

Now, this boy had a serious reason for pressing on his eye patch.

With his left eye, he didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

If someone else had looked around, they wouldn't have seen anything to be afraid of. In that dark alleyway, they wouldn't have seen the shadow of anything other than the young boy.

If they were a normal human that is.

"..."

However, Itsuki could *see* something with his right eye .

Through the eye patch, through the palm of his hand, he could *see* them clearly.

... Red eyes.

The blazing red eyes glared at Itsuki from three meters above. There were six eyes in all—two on each head.

It was a massive, fearsome three-headed dog.

It was almost twice as tall as Itsuki, and had stiff black skin and hellish red eyes—not to mention the three heads that almost spanned the whole width of the alleyway. Each of the heads had a strong demonic presence, as if even just looking at it would cause one's soul to be snatched away.

... It perfectly matched the figure in the reference documents.

"... A-Ah, um..."

"GARAAAAAAAA"

Burning hot breath emanated from the left and right heads. Just the passing wind of that breath made Itsuki's hair stand on end. Any hotter and he'd have been burned to a crisp.

Naturally that would be the case.

It was like a fusion of its ancient ancestor who guarded the gates of the underworld and the Black Dog that strode through Europe. According to the reference documents, its breath's maximum temperature was two thousand or three thousand degrees. No matter what, any human would be turned to ash in an instant. Such was the nature of magical beasts.

However, if we are talking about humans with a magical eye, perhaps they had some method of resistance ...

Immediately after,

Itsuki waved his hands in front of his face with all his might.

"No... um... I-I definitely taste horrible!"

With all of the desperation of a grade schooler being extorted by a middle schooler, Itsuki vigorously shook his head.

... Correction.

He had absolutely no way of resisting at all.

"GRYYYYIII?"

"JRYYYYIII?"

"ZRYYYIIII!"

The three heads examined Itsuki from different angles.

It looked like they were arguing over which head would get to eat him. Or maybe they were just trying to decide how to cook him.

"Uh, uh, ahahaha...!" Itsuki let out a dry laugh.

As if pleased with the reaction, the three heads smacked their pure white teeth together.

They were laughing.

With a twisting sound, something cold grabbed onto Itsuki's back.

"Awaawaawwawaa!"

As he let out an incomprehensible scream, Itsuki flailed his arms and legs.

At the same time, the demon dog jumped.

It was unbelievably nimble. Even though it seemed to rub against the sides of the narrow alleyway just by walking, it had kicked off the walls two or three times and landed behind Itsuki.

"Wh-Whaaaa?"

His eyes widened to the size of a dinner plate.

However, he had no time to be astonished. Within a moment, Itsuki's field of vision was enveloped in pure red.

It was a pure red, burning, terrible-smelling...

tongue.

Lick

"..."

Lick, lick, lick, lick...

".....eh?"

He opened his eyes.

Through the sticky saliva, he saw the demon dog panting and wagging its tail. The dog wagged its tail with all the eagerness it could muster, as if this was the happiest moment of its life.

"Wawawawawa!"

The three heads licked Itsuki's face over and over feverishly.

From behind, a jolly voice rang out.

"Oh, as expected of you, President, being the first to arrive."

"... Hey, Nekoyashiki-san."

Itsuki, covered in slobber, turned around. He saw a young man holding a folding fan.

He was a head taller than Itsuki, had bleached silver hair and long, thin eyes that stretched to the bridge of his nose. His figure seemed to personify the word "beautiful." However, his Heian-style *haori*[1] and folding fan easily destroyed any traces of that beauty.

Also, just as his name implied[2], from within his haori, *they* popped out here and there...

"Meow"

"Meorw"

"Mrrow"

"Me~oww"

... four in total: white, spotted, black, and calico cats.

"Mm... there, there. I was a bit caught up with feeding these children, so I ended up coming late. Cats are good, they are. Treasures of humanity. Treasures of the Earth. No, no, space... space-time; no, the treasures of *alaya-vijnana*[3] they are! The saying that a cat is worth a thousand gold pieces is stingy, for in the opinion of myself, Nekoyashiki Ren, they are worth ten thousand... no, a million!"

"Uh... rather than discuss cats, what the heck is with this dog?!"

Itsuki complains while the demon dog's rough tongue continues to scrape against his skin.

In contrast, the man festooned with cats placed his folding fan against his mouth and tilted his head to the side.

"Hm? What about it? You heard that it likes people, right?"

"Likes... people?"

That kind of went without saying. Except that rather than liking people, Itsuki had the impression that it liked *to eat* people.

"Oh, President. Once again, it looks like you only skimmed the reference papers. This time it's a pet search. Got it?"

"P-Pet?" Itsuki parroted involuntarily.

"Though it's only a subspecies of the descendents of Cerberus, it still makes an ideal familiar. It ran away while being transported. Looks like we've finished our request, haven't we?"

"..."

Itsuki said nothing.

However, there was a visible change in the demon dog .

"GRYYYYYY?"

Suddenly letting go of Itsuki, the dog let out a howl, wary of the man and the cats. It heaved its body around.

"My, my, Ultros-san!"

It had incredible agility.

Ultros, the demon dog, rushed down the alleyway faster than Nekoyashiki could even shout.

"—Cleanse, purify—"

This time, a lisping but cool and clear voice echoed down the alleyway.

"Cleanse, purify. Amidst woven pattern of rock and cloud, blade of the wise great god, disperse all misfortune, the Buddha in Heaven..."

An evergreen branch adorned with white strips of paper—a *tamagushi*[4]—moved in the darkness. As it waved, the demon dog jumped far back, returning to where Itsuki stood. It hung its head and whimpered as if it was discovered by its master while it was making mischief.

"Huh?"

Itsuki blinked.

At the other end of the alleyway stood a young lady with pigtails. Actually, she looked to be about eight. Rather than a young lady, she could more accurately be called a little girl.

Her clothes looked a bit like Ren's. She wore a pure white *chihaya* with a crane design, together with a crimson *hakama*. That is to say, a *miko*'s[5] outfit. She had a red schoolbag on her back and apparently had come directly from school.

"Enough, Nekoyashiki-san. Didn't you hear that this one gets timid when it senses other magical beasts' spell powers?"

Puffing out her cheeks, the little girl stood with her arms akimbo.

Her name was Katsuragi Mikan. A third year elementary school student; she was an employee-under-contract in the *Shintou*[6] department. That is to say, this was her part-time job.

"Ahaha. An honest mistake."

The young man called Nekoyashiki Ren let out a carefree laugh. He was the acting senior managing director and head of the *Onmyoudou*[7] department. He was said to be the main force behind and leading **<Astral >**.

"Well then, shall we leave the last part to our President ?"

"Eh, me?"

Itsuki's eyes were still spinning as Nekoyashiki handed him three seals. Complicated symbols danced across the surfaces of those slips of paper. If you showed those seals to someone even slightly versed in calligraphy, their eyes might have flown wide in

amazement. However, they had no effect on the current Itsuki, whose eyes were already wide open.

"So... you've gotta stick them to its heads. If I go any closer, it'll get scared and run away again."

"..."

Itsuki held his breath.

He looked several times from Nekoyashiki to the demon dog and back. He thought of asking Mikan to do it, but she was on the other side of the dog.

"U-Under...stood."

With a completely pale face, Itsuki nodded like a puppet.

"Good luck, President Onii-chan," Mikan said, smiling.

"Ah... ahahaha." A dry laugh leaked out of Itsuki as he stepped closer and closer to Ultros.

"GRYYYYYYYY?"

"I-I-I-It's alright. I won't hurt you..."

Pat

The first one.

With that, the left head drooped and fell comfortably asleep.

"JRYYYYYYYYY"

"I-I-I-I-I-I-I'm not doing anything... just sticking some seals here..."

Pat

The second one.

*"ZRYYYYYYYY

"My, oh my!"

"Me~eorw?"

Itsuki felt as though voices were calling him from far off.

Bye bye. See you later. Thank you.

Part 2

"...!!!"

Itsuki opened his eye.

For a moment, he didn't know where he was.

He looked around. It was red.

He was in the classroom at sunset.

One of his classmates was looking at him with a tired face.

"Hey, Ibaitsu?"

Yamada tried calling him from the seat next to him. Yamada was the *goban*-faced[8] "hope" of the physics club . Incidentally, he was called the "hope" because he had won the physics club fighting game tournament during the new student welcoming ceremony without a single loss.

"Of course, you finally wake up after sleeping straight from the beginning of first period to the end of supplementary lessons. Have you ever considered that you might be possessed or something?"

"Wow... I was out of it for that long?"

"Yeah, you were making some amusing moans all through class. No one felt like touching you." Yamada goggled his *sanpaku*[9] eyes at Itsuki. "You were talking about a three-headed, monster dog or something. Did you wander out at night after watching a horror film? Something like 'Terror! Flying Killer Tomato V.S. Ed Wood?'"

"I don't think there was a dog in that one."

"Forget about it. You always faint during horror films anyway."

"Isn't that natural? They are kind of scary..."

"Heh, I still remember you swooning during 'Nobita's Great Adventure into the Underworld.'[10]"

"Ack!"

Oh, the trauma.

Ever since elementary school, every time he went out he ended up in some unfavorable situation. Just half a month after he entered this school, the whole class knew he was a scaredy-cat thanks to Yamada. Even the neighboring classes knew him as "The Guy Who Fainted from Watching Doraemon."

"Kehehehehh!" After laughing like a demon for a while, Yamada asked, "So, what's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, you've looked a little funny since last week."

Yamada lowered his eyebrow and crossed his arms.

"F-Funny?"

"Yeah. You're normally out cold, but recently you've been doing it a lot more. Have you taken up some kind of weird part-time job or something?"

"Mm... sort of..."

Giving an ambiguous laugh, Itsuki rubbed his cheek.

"Well, whatever. I thought you were gonna go with your Uncle Kusakabe to America, weren't you?"

"I can't do that. I've got to hold down the house here and I don't want to cause him that much trouble..."

"Well it's too late for that now. And after you guys had been living together for several years..."

"Well, just go with what's logical, I guess."

Yamada sighed at Itsuki's words.

"Man, you're a good guy in a weird place. I don't really much care about that, but at least visit us once in a while.

Aneki's[11] always saying you should show your face more."

"Yeah, thanks," Itsuki said meekly.

Yamada dropped his shoulders tiredly. However, he suddenly tilted his head.

"Oh yeah, I heard from *aneki*, your father's case has been wrapped up, right? A lawyer sent some kind of letter. So they found your dad after all?"

"Uh..."

Seeing that Itsuki was having trouble putting his thoughts into words, Yamada tapped the back of Itsuki's head.

"Hm, I guess that was asking too much. Well, if you really want to know, then just call your sister."

Yamada was totally shameless.

Itsuki shook his head, giving a wry smile.

"It's okay, I don't really mind. Since it's already been seven years since he went missing, I've just thought of him as dead."

"... I see. That bad, huh?"

"I really don't have any feelings about it, though. I've been living with Kusakabe since before he went missing, after all."

"Yeah, you've really got nothing to complain about there... Man, if I could live with Yuuka-chan..."

"Hush, lolicon."

"You shut up, greenhorn!"

As they were talking, Itsuki's cell phone started rumbling in his pocket.

When he saw the caller ID, Itsuki's heart lurched.

"Ack!"

"Hm? What's wrong? Take it if you need to."

"Y-Yeah..."

Gulping down a huge gob of saliva, he pressed the talk button.

The moment he did...

"Oh, President!"

"Huh?"

Yamada's ears perked up.

"Hey... Nekoyashiki-san, what is it?"

"Along with the succession procedures I told you about, we've got a new employee coming in. Can you swing by here tomorrow, President?"

"Uh, yes... I understand, but..."

"Also, I need you to sign the documents confirming the capture and return of Ultros the other day."

"Y-Yes... Understood. Well, see you later."

As he cut the call, just as he expected, Yamada was staring at him with wide eyes.

"Ibaitsu... did someone just call you... 'President'?"

"N-No... it was just a wrong number."

"And you answered it?"

"That's, uh... s-sorry. I have to go home now!"

"Wait up, Ibaitsu!"

Standing up in a panic, Itsuki grabbed his school bag and ran away.

When he left the classroom, it was already evening.

People who have disappeared are dealt with as deceased after seven years, according to the law.

Iba Itsuki knew this because of a particular letter he had received.

"Oh... it's about dad."

Printed on a pretty, white envelope that seemed like it would be a waste to throw out was, "Regarding the Inheritance of Iba Tsukasa's Assets".

Though it was kind of cold of him, Itsuki hadn't even thought about his father until receiving the letter. Since his father had gone missing a long time ago, when Itsuki was still too small to remember, he had been given to his uncle and his uncle's wife to be taken care of. Since they had treated him just like family, Itsuki pretty much considered them to be such.

Itsuki's uncle had raised him perfectly well.

He gave both Itsuki and his real daughter, Yuuka, the same amount of affection, and even though he knew that Itsuki could see things like ghosts and monsters, he didn't fear Itsuki or give him any flack for it even once. Rather, saying it was for self-defense, he gathered lots of reference and information books for Itsuki. To Itsuki, who was often chased by monsters because of his weak appearance, the reason he was able to live for so long was thanks to his uncle.

— As a result, aside from occasional bouts of fear and bullying, Iba Itsuki led a decidedly peaceful and average life.

But now...

For the first time, Itsuki resented his father and uncle a little bit.

That's not to say that such resentment was undeserved . After all, there must have been a reason why he was given to his uncle. When the letter came, he refrained from speaking about it to his uncle (who was now in America) out of concern over the issue.

However, it was still totally unexpected.

... Man, Uncle, you're no fair! Itsuki lamented in his heart. *To think that Dad was president of some magician company, and Uncle didn't even say anything about it! Not once!*

Not to mention that he would have to succeed his father as president once he died!

After eating ramen for dinner on the way home, Itsuki stopped in the nearby park and made a phone call.

"[Good morning][12]... oh, Itsuki *nii-san*[13]? What's wrong?"

It was Yuuka. Thanks to the time difference, her voice was sleepy. It couldn't be helped. Nine in the evening in Japan was still early morning in New York.

"Um... hey, is Uncle there?"

"He's on a business trip. He flew off somewhere to the Great Lakes. He hasn't been calling regularly either, so Mom's pretty mad."

"I see..."

"Hey, hey, when are you coming to visit, *Onii-san*?"

He heard the sound of rubbing against a blanket on the other end of the line. It seemed like Yuuka had just gotten out of bed.

"It's no use until summer break. High school is too much, right now."

"I wish you could come to school here..."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not so good with English, unlike you."

"You'll get used to it in a month!" she assured him cheerfully. There was a difference in their mental abilities that Itsuki wished she would consider.

"... Yeah, yeah... Say, Yuuka, have you ever heard anything about some company called <Astral>?" he tried asking suddenly.

"Huh? What?"

A puzzled voice came back to him. But then Yuuka's tone turned serious.

"*Onii-san*... did you see something again?"

Ack!

Bull's-eye.

"N-No, it's not anything like that...!"

"Re~ally?"

"Yeah. Well, I'm going to go. International calls are expensive!"

"Talk to you soon, then!"

Cutting the connection, Itsuki took a deep breath. Yuuka was pretty perceptive. If he talked to her any further, he'd definitely be found out.

"... Of course I can't tell her I've been made a company president..."

Itsuki had a far-off look on his face.

He sat on the swings, kicking back and forth against the ground weakly.

Ruminating over the conversation at the mansion the week before, Itsuki heaved a sigh.

--The mansion.

That was the office of the magician dispatch company <Astral>.

It was a very small mansion, hidden among several other buildings, and you wouldn't notice it unless you

already knew about it. After receiving the letter about his inheritance, Nekoyashiki gave him a big nod and handed him several documents.

There was a Transfer of Management Contract, an Inheritance Rights Contract, and several other papers with difficult-looking contents; but that wasn't the problem. He was uncertain about his father's appearance and past, which he was just beginning to learn about.

However, when he was handed the business card, the world turned upside-down.

On a card embossed with a crystal watermark, the title , "Nekoyashiki Ren - Onmyoudou Department Head" was printed along with the following in sepia-colored letters:

<Magician Dispatch Company・ Astral

— We rent magicians to meet your needs>

"..."

Itsuki simply sat speechless for several seconds.

"... Um, what exactly is this?"

"Can you read? We support customers with magicians from all around the world, versed in magic arts from kokkuri-san[14] *to voodoo, to fulfill their requests. Though, we're a bit shorthanded right now."*

Smiling, Nekoyashiki fluttered his folding fan.

"So, I want you to succeed to the position of president of this company."

"President-san, President-san~!"

Itsuki's eye shrank to a dot.

"—Hey, wait a second! I'm a high school student! I don't remember anything about my father at all, and what exactly does 'magician dispatch' entail?!"

"It's not a problem. So long as there's a guardian, even a high school student can manage a company."

Holding a teacup in his hand, Nekoyashiki gave a flawless business smile and nodded. If he weren't covered from head to toe in cats, he could pass as an exemplary model of a businessman.

"But why do I have to inherit anything?! Why don't you become president, Nekoyashiki-san? I'll sign whatever contracts or anything I need to in order to pass it on to you."

"The fetters of industry don't really appeal to me."

Nekoyashiki put on a cheap smile.

"We got an order from the <Organization>; a strong recommendation that the head of the association—that is, the position of president—be a blood relative. If we ignore what they say, we can't do business, and tomorrow we'll all be wandering the streets."

"Bankruptcy? Restructuring? Bad debt?" Mikan said in a worried voice, looking up at Itsuki.

Then, the cats began to exert wordless pressure. Itsuki couldn't find the words to go against their adorableness.

"Uh, um..."

No words.

The floor under his feet began to rumble with a strange moan. If he refused rashly, the floor would surely break open and unleash some kind of horrible monster.

"I... I can't use magic or anything..."

"Don't worry about it. It will be enough for now if you simply sign and stamp here."

Nekoyashiki smiled and nodded.

Itsuki's avenues of escape were vanishing one by one.

Suddenly, Mikan grabbed the armrest of the sofa. Latching onto it with her small hands, her mouth formed a へ shape.

"..."

Wordlessness.

"..."

Silence.

"..."

Stillness.

Itsuki finally cracked.

"Al-Alright..."

He gave the slightest nod.

"That's wonderful, President!"

"Onii-chan's a president~!"

"Meowowow! Meeeow!"

Cheers came from all sides of the office.

Washed away by the sound of the cheers, Itsuki was crushed by despair.

"... A~ah..."

Heaving a huge sigh, Itsuki unsteadily hit his forehead against the swing's chain. Lowering his head, he looked like an old man on the verge of death.

This is bad! This is really bad!

No matter how he looked at it, it was bad. By some mistake, the class fool had become the president of a magician company. Even more of a mystery was his employees.

"Along with Mikan and me, our board director, Hazel, is off touring Europe, and we've got a new employee coming in soon. We've also got three or so freelancers helping us part-time," Nekoyashiki had said.

Since then, ten days had passed. Furthermore, in the days leading up to today he had gotten involved in a monster capture. Going home with heavy steps, it was natural for him to stop in the park.

It was a small park.

It was near his house and he would flee here often ever since kindergarten. It was in a dead zone formed by the school district, so almost no one came through. Occasionally, he would hide in the earthen pipe tucked away in the shadow of a tree and finally be able to sleep soundly.

"Even if I hide, nothing will change..."

He looked irresolutely at the earthen pipe. He struggled over whether he should really hide in it. Even if he went to America like Yuuka said, it wasn't likely that Nekoyashiki would give up on him.

— But, at a time like this, the earthen pipe was a place where he could ball up his misfortune.

After heaving his fifty-sixth sigh, Itsuki got up from the swing.

Ping!

Suddenly, it felt as though a hot, iron spike had pierced his right eye.

"--gh!"

It was just a hallucination, right?

Right?

Actually, it was a sensation like approaching death. Heck, it felt like death itself. Something had turned the park into a veritable hell in just a moment.

... He couldn't turn around.

No matter what happened, he couldn't turn around.

But he did. And there...

"You are the president of <Astral>, yes?"

"Uwa~ah!"

Itsuki jumped upon hearing the voice from behind him .

There shouldn't have been anyone else in the park. There were only two entrances and he hadn't seen anything pass through either of them.

Nonetheless, a girl stood before him.

Like destiny, like a nightmare, she was chuckling.

"...ah."

Itsuki couldn't speak. Stuck on his butt, he simply flapped his mouth open and closed.

"My my..."

At his appearance, the girl smiled from ear to ear.

"Excuse me, but I did not want to intrude on your home, so I invoked a reading to link me directly to your location. First, at least look me in the eyes. I am called Adilisia • lenn • Mathers. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

Grasping the skirt of her pure black dress, she made an elegant curtsey.

She looked as though she had been pulled straight out of a western painting. She was beautiful.

Even in the night, her hair was a brilliant gold color, and it was set into vertical curls. Her strong, green eyes looked down at Itsuki. Here and there, complicated

patterns of gold and silver thread adorned her dress. She seemed to be about the same age as Itsuki.

"...You-You are..."

As Itsuki struggled to regain the use of coherent speech, the girl smiled and waited.

However, her smile collapsed upon hearing his next sentence.

"... Reading? Are you an employee of <Astral> too? Then you're the new employee I was told would come to teach me?"

"No."

The girl's—Adilisia's—cheeks quickly turned a rosy crimson.

At the same time, another nasty pressure stabbed into Itsuki's right eye.

Aah!

With that pain, he knew.

This was spell power.

The origin of all these mysteries, the great "power" itself. That demon dog had been captured thanks to spell power, and it was coming from this girl without her invoking any spells.

"How dare you! To call me an employee of <Astral>...!
"

Itsuki's skin began to go numb little by little, and Adilisia's spell power began to swirl. Under his eye patch , Itsuki's right eye seemed ready to explode.

"Uh... Did I say something wrong?"

"—!"

"Uwa!"

Seeing the girl's face freeze, Itsuki grasped his eye patch quickly.

"It can't be... you don't even know?" Adilisia asked in a too-gentle gentle voice.

"... Huh?"

"Are you telling me that you do not know the name Adilisia • lenn • Mathers?"

Itsuki's right eye, and his throat, hurt.

When he gulped, the gob of saliva felt like a stone.

... If he answered carelessly, he thought he would definitely die. He felt the touch of death through his individual hairs, creeping into the pieces of his soul. Thinking only of that feeling, he was like a poor little animal about to be eaten.

Feeling his heart thumping loudly, he desperately nodded his head.

"Y-Yes..."

"... Hmph. I see."

Adilisia's eyes grew dead cold.

"The president of <Astral>, when he hears the name ' Mathers'... does not know who that is?"

I only just became the president!

"..."

The girl glared at Itsuki, who simply nodded, unable to say a thing. He felt as if he were a frog being stared down by a snake.

"You aren't lying, are you...? Are you really Iba Itsuki?"

"Y-Yes, I am, but..."

His words caught in his throat, Itsuki looked back up at the girl before him.

Her fearsome spell power hadn't changed. However, the ghastliness about it had slightly diminished.

Between the two of them, there was a tired feeling.

"It is okay. It seems I have not made a mistake in reaching you, President of <Astral>."

Throwing back her golden hair, Adilisia let out a small sigh. She seemed to make all of her movements separately.

Slowly walking forward, she moved to Itsuki's side.

With all the pomp of a queen, she issued an order.

"Withdraw from the next offer."

"Off...er?"

Itsuki boggled his eye at her.

He was utterly un-informed about anything.

Nekoyashiki-san, you said I would just have to sign and stamp, and everything would be fine!

"Uh... sure..."

"Wonderful. If that is the case, then there is a way."

Saying this, the girl pulled a sheet of something from somewhere in her dress.

It was piece of parchment.

It was also kind of ominous-looking. The rough surface seemed to have veins of poison running through it, and the red letters scrawled across it looked sort of like human blood.

"Uh... um... this is..."

"Did you not just make your decision? If you do not understand my words, then we can negotiate this through the <Organization>. Everything will be fine with just one signature."

Adilisia smiled.

It was a flowery smile, but it made Itsuki break into a cold sweat.

"Sign...?"

"Yes, if you just pull out of the next job, everything will be fine."

She spoke in a whisper that could well have been that of Mephistopheles, who had stolen the soul of a philosopher.

However, Itsuki hesitated in taking the quill and parchment held out to him by Adilisia.

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing, it's just..."

Stiffening his face, Itsuki laughed ambiguously. As expected, he had no decision-making skills as president.

Unable to judge his appearance, Adilisia gave a single nod.

"If that is the case, allow me to lend you a hand."

"Huh?"

"--Come forth, Botis. Wise earl commanding sixty armies--"

A shrieking snake appeared in Adilisia's hand in a flash.

"U-Uwa...!"

In front of Itsuki, who had begun to shout, the snake's eyes twinkled brightly.

In an instant, Itsuki's voice was caught in his throat and his body became petrified.

"Now, let us continue."

... Hunh?

His body began to move on its own.

With empty eyes, Itsuki took the quill and parchment and his body obeyed Adilisia.

Huh--!? This isn't good!

His body neglecting his will, he took the quill and touched it to the parchment.

"... Yes."

A smile bloomed across Adilisia's face like a flower.

But then...

"That's as far as you go."

A third cold voice fell.

Yes—it fell to the ground.

Part 3

Something sliced through the darkness.

With a swift gust, the parchment ripped in half. As the pieces danced through the air, they caught fire and burned to ash.

"Uwah!"

Itsuki reflexively waved his hand. Just as the parchment was destroyed, he regained control of his body.

"— Mistletoe Spear."

Picking up the small twig thrown at her feet, Adilisia looked up at the sky.

"Honami!"

Another character had appeared, floating in the night sky.

She sat horizontally on an old broom with her back to the moon. Her chestnut-colored hair was tied back with a ribbon. She wore a surprisingly large, pointed hat. Her fingers wrapped around a twisted oak rod.

— Yes, she had the appearance of a witch straight out of a fairytale.

However, the one thing about her different from a regular witch was that she was wearing a sailor uniform. It was surprising to see an innocent girl of about fifteen or sixteen wearing a pointed hat and a dark cape.

And though it was unrelated to the situation, Itsuki thought she was pretty.

If Adilisia was a magnificent jewel; then this girl was a single, painstakingly raised, blue rose. She didn't have the brilliance of a gemstone but her figure was unparalleled. She wasn't a sure winner but there was no counting her out of the race just yet.

"Aren't you overdoing things a bit, Addie? I think summoning one of the seventy two demons is going a bit too far."

From behind her thin-rimmed glasses, her ice-blue eyes smiled.

"Do not act overly-familiar with me, addressing me by such a name!"

Adilisia waved her hand widely.

She took on a belligerent demeanor, as if all her previous elegance had been a lie.

Anger flared up in her eyes. She seemed to be looking at an irreconcilable enemy.

"I have already explained. According to the <Organization>, the next <Night> is going to be rather significant. It is no time for <Astral> to butt-in!"

"Okay," the girl called Honami gave a disinterested assent. "But still, for 'rather significant', <Goetia>'s youngest leader in history came all the way out to this Far-East back-country?"

"That is none of your business. I take on the work that I wish to do. That is all."

"Well then, I suggest you stop making passes at our president."

Honami shrugged.

Itsuki, watching from the side, could tell how much Adilisia had vested in whatever she was talking about.

The pain in his right eye that he had forgotten about suddenly returned in full force.

Even so, the witch on the broom lightly brushed off Adilisia's words.

With that, he could tell that this person was of the same level or higher than Adilisia.

...gh

Finally realizing what was going on, Itsuki held his breath.

Does this mean... that this is a magician showdown!?

And of course, he was wide open in the middle of it. Not only was his life at risk, his soul was too.

However, he couldn't escape.

The spell power in Adilisia began to amass in far greater amounts than it had before. Once that power exploded, a magical battle of unimaginable proportions would begin.

Itsuki felt as though a drill was boring through his eye patch straight into his right eye.

More than the pain, though—he felt a horrible sensation that something was encroaching on his eye, as if it were being invaded.

Finally, the park itself seemed to turn into an alternate world...

"... Let us stop this. Tonight is not the time or place for this," Adilisia said, lowering her arm. "Since we are contracted to do the same work, we will unfortunately be in conflict. That is when we shall weigh our relative merits."

"Whatever."

"—!"

Adilisia bit her lip at Honami's blunt response.

However she immediately turning her head and chanted, **"Come forth, Bathin, powerful duke commanding thirty armies..."**

A pale, phantom horse was immediately summoned to her side. Then, as the night wind blew through the park, Adilisia's figure disappeared.

"A Solomon demon that transports people instantly? There's quite a crowd of them, aren't there?"

Giving a small sigh, Honami looked down at the park.

"This little spell power probably won't disappear quick . What was she planning to do if that turned into spell wave pollution...?"

Pushing up her hat while making a troubled face, she tossed a thin twig into each of the four corners of the park.

"Ah..."

Itsuki raised his voice.

The pain in his right eye disappeared in a flash. The spell power that remained in the park had just been wiped out with a cleansing ritual.

"That'll do it, probably."

The witch on the broom dusted off her hands.

She then lowered her gaze to Itsuki.

"Is your right eye alright?"

"Ah... ah, yeah."

Since it looked like she had been worried for him, he nodded quickly. Not a bit of pain remained.

"I see. That's great, then," she said nonchalantly. She slowly floated down and stood in front of Itsuki.

Standing right in front of him, the witch seemed even lovelier. Her chestnut hair mixed with the color of her eyes was probably because she was of mixed race.

Blood began rushing to Itsuki's head.

Walking up to him to the point that he could feel her breath, the witch held out a hand to Itsuki's cheek.

"Uwah!"

"You're bleeding."

She wiped a white finger below his eye patch. It was soft, pleasant, and smelled good.

She slid the finger softly across his eye patch.

"..."

The witch's eyes grew slightly narrow.

"Wh-What is it?"

"— Nothing. It's pretty sensitive, so you could have lost your eyesight from that spell power. Be careful. Also, take this. Nekoyashiki-san asked me to give it to you."

She pressed a small badge into Itsuki's hand. From the silver mirror decorated with a pentagram, it seemed to be a company badge.

"A company badge... so, I'm guessing you're an < Astral> employee?"

Not responding to his question, Honami turned her broom diagonally. It should have fallen over, but it floated in the air merrily while supporting the witch's petite body.

"— Honami Takase Ambler."

"Huh?"

"That's my name. We'll get to know each other for real tomorrow. Don't get seen going home like this, okay? ... President."

Smiling faintly, the witch's shape flew off somewhere into the sky.

The badge in Itsuki's hand sparkled, reflecting the light of the moon.

Part 4

The next day.

Itsuki examined the badge as he sat at his desk in the classroom. He was, of course, unable to sleep at all last night and ended up going to school early.

I wonder if there really isn't any way to get out of this.

Itsuki began to worry again.

He felt almost disembodied. In regard to the demon dog incident and the park the night before, he felt as though he had died and come back to life. He had been involved in supernatural incidents before, but nothing like what was happening now.

No, there's only one way.

Holding onto the badge, he ran his hand across his eye patch.

He thought of when he had to start wearing it.

He didn't remember very well, but it was probably around kindergarten. He had been chased by a monster and he took a huge wound that could have cost him his right eye. His right eye was completely useless for a week and eventually became unable to tolerate light, requiring the use of an eye patch.

... Though I can still see monsters with it, even though the patch is over it.

Itsuki sighed. No matter what he thought, it was bad luck that he couldn't sell back. Rather, they were having a bargain on hemorrhages.

He tapped the badge on his desk, making it ring like a wind chime.

I wonder if that girl's going to be at the office today, he suddenly thought, becoming glum again.

Nekoyashiki had told him to come to the office after school. However, wasn't that just stepping deeper into the swamp? At this point, the best he could come up with was calling Yuuka and flying off to America.

"What's that badge?" Yamada asked from behind him.

"Ack! Uh, it's nothing."

Flustered, Itsuki waved his right hand. He had apparently been lost in thought for a while. When he looked around, he saw the usual boisterousness that preceded homeroom.

Cutting through two or three meaningless conversations, the bell signaling the start of class rang.

The door rattled.

"__"

... Itsuki was frozen solid, right down to his individual brain cells.

In contrast to Itsuki's reaction, cheers began to echo across the classroom. Eighty percent of the male students and all of the female students were speechless, their eyes popping out.

It was because the homeroom teacher was leading in an unfamiliar girl.

No... correction...

There were *two* girls.

"Uh... I don't know if you've all heard or not, but these two transfer students will be joining our class from now on. First, introduce yourselves."

Itsuki didn't hear the teacher's sleepy voice at all. Probably because his ears wanted to refuse what he was hearing.

"I am called Adilisia • lenn • Mathers. I will only be here for a few months. But for now, it is a pleasure to meet you all."

"I'm Honami Takase Ambler. Nice to meet you guys."

Amidst the applause echoing through the room, Itsuki could clearly hear the sound of something shattering.

It was the sound of his peaceful life being smashed and scattered across the floor.

*

Scene change.

Later that evening, a single man stepped into a certain park.

It was the park where Itsuki had first seen Honami and Adilisia the night before. There were no children left in the park and against the backdrop of the deep crimson sky, the rusty swing swayed forlornly in the wind.

"Looks like this is the place after all."

The man slackened his blank face.

He was a hard man to judge in a single glance. His delicate looks suggested he was in his twenties. And he wore a business suit with no peculiarities. He was about medium height. The length of his nose, the thickness of his lips, the size of his eyebrows, the deepness of his eyes—they all seemed to be about average.

It was as if his characteristics defied any attempt to characterize him.

There was one thing that didn't follow the rule: the L-shaped wires he held in each hand.

The two parallel wires occasionally twitched left or right and the man followed their direction precisely, as if he were remote-controlled.

This was the magical art of dowsing.

It used a person's subconscious to find hidden treasure or a source of water. It was one of the old magical arts well known in England.

"Yes, yes."

Nodding, the man stopped as the wires crossed each other between the jungle gym and the monkey bars.

As he did, the man touched a red pen to his tongue and made a notation on his small map.

It was a municipal map. It was a 1/300,000 scale reduced map with several X marks and small annotations scrawled across it.

"— Spell wave pollution class six to seven. It looks like someone tried to clean it up, but it seems to have revived afterward. The Ley Line[15] waves are all according to the calculations. The <Night> is near. Now, the participants.. ."

Folding up his map, the man took out a notepad.

He let out a sigh.

"<Goetia> and... <Astral>. Those are a couple of nostalgic names, eh?"

He seemed to be enjoying himself.

Even so, his eyes did not smile in the slightest. Only his lips stretched to either side of his face. It looked almost as if his mouth was a gaping slash.

The man's red, unpleasant shadow seemed to contaminate the ground of the park.

---

1. ↑ A Haori (羽) — a type of traditional Japanese over-robe.
2. ↑ Nekoyashiki (猫) means (: cat) (: mansion)".
3. ↑ The Buddhist concept of "Eight Consciousnesses," or the consciousness forming the base of all human existence.
4. ↑ A tamagushi is a traditional Shinto implement
5. ↑ Miko (巫) are traditional holy women of the Shintou religion.
6. ↑ Shintou (神 *lit: way of the gods*) is the popular mythological tradition of Japan.
7. ↑ Onmyoudou (陰) is a traditional Japanese occult system of thought that mixes ideas from many Asian philosophies.
8. ↑ i.e. his face looks like a Go Board.

9. ↑ Sanpakugan (三 *lit: three whites eyes*) refers to when the iris is small, with white showing between the iris and lower eyelid.
10. ↑ A Doraemon movie
11. ↑ Yamada's Older Sister – More about Familial Honorifics
12. ↑ Written in English in the original text
13. ↑ Informal for *Older Brother*
14. ↑ Fortune-Telling game, Kokkuri, rather like a Ouija board
15. ↑ Referring to the spiritual and metaphysical meaning of Ley Lines.

Chapter 2 - The Magician's Offer

Part 1

"A~ah, President *Onii-chan* is dea~d..."

"Hey there, that's not the proper way to leave the physical realm now, is it?"

"Meowowow, meo~w!"

One after another, Mikan, Nekoyashiki, and Nekoyashiki's cats tapped him on the head.

"... P-Please... sorry."

Lying prostrate on the ground, Itsuki was at the verge of death, and finally managed to move just his finger.

He was at the mansion.

On Itsuki's overturned wooden desk had been a massive pile of documents, beakers, pyramidal flasks, some machine that looked like a microscope, and a dessicated monkey's arm. All of this was now on top of him. From underneath the veritable trash heap, only Itsuki's head remained, albeit barely, untouched.

"Even though you're not done with studies and examinations?" Honami chided roughly, knocking on the stack of documents.

"Ah... yes, I know...!"

"Then finish reading from "Hand of Glory" to "The Book of Albertus"."

Recovering from his near-death experience, Itsuki shook his head and picked up the old book. It was now almost a conditioned reflex. With emptier eyes than he had when he was under Adilisia's control, he continued to read the Grimoire.

— A week had already passed since the incident in the park.

In that time, Honami—who had transferred into his class—gave him a rough education. It consisted of lessons relating to both his presidential duties and magical studies.

Itsuki was now forced to devote himself to his studies since he was followed in and out of school, with nowhere to run.

"What kind of stuff are you reading," Nekoyashiki asked from behind him in a relaxed manner.

"He's got no talent," Honami declared. "He tried basic spells and affinities, but he sucks at everything. He probably wouldn't even be able to do anything with ten years of studying. Give him twenty years and he might be able to call on a low class spirit, though it still might not be satisfactory."

Having this said right behind his back was a little irksome. What was he studying for, then?

"Heheheh, I thought that he might have the makings of a genius since he could see ghosts and monsters. But it doesn't seem to be so, does it?"

"Rather than genius, it seems like just genes. Something close to a *kenki*[1] or a *jougan*[2], I'd think."

"There is the legend of the *kenki* becoming a powerful mountain wizard, you know."

"Isn't that, itself, an exception to an exception? There's no logic to it, so you can't include it into the calculations."

"What if we gave him some kind of elixir or spirit drug ? Honami-san, in addition to Celtic magic, you know Witchcraft, right?"

"Of course, I've already tried that stuff. I've tried everything from Mandragora root to bat wings boiled in mercury to mashed toad intestines to just plain old Magnesia solution. Not one thing caused a positive response, so I'd say he's just got no brains."

Yes, he had truly come close to death when Honami forced him to eat aconite. He'd never thought those kinds of things would ever enter his mouth.

"Well, rather than magic, we'll just have to make sure he focuses exclusively on presidential work."

"I see. If that's the case, where should we start? We have one set for studying, but..."

Standing up, Nekoyashiki opened the closet.

Looking into it, Itsuki saw several shelves filled with books.

"Let's start with something to give him the main points . We can consult with Director Hazel too but I'd start

with all twelve volumes of *Detailed Exposition of Economic Values — General Remarks* and all six of *Mosaic Organization Structure: Basic Theory*."

It was the first time he had even heard of textbooks being divided into volumes. They all had bindings so thick that it was not unthinkable that he could club someone to death with them. To make matters worse, just looking at a page out of them made his brain melt down.

"Um, you said it would be okay if I just signed and stamped..."

Itsuki tried raising a pitiful voice of resistance, but...

"Did you even consider what you were signing up to do when you stamped?"

Honami's ice-blue eyes became even icier. They were probably even colder than the Cocytus of Greek legend.

"Other than holding the majority vote, you'll have to know the company's economic status and relative value compared with other companies. As for magic: if you

don't memorize how to apply your employees' individual abilities, we'll never get work and even at the best of times be stuck with no jobs."

Her supple finger pointed at Itsuki, stabbing through his heart.

Incidentally, the businesses front of <Astral>'s office was a fortune-telling center and a recruitment agency for an occult magazine.

That is to say, 90% of their income came from these activities.

"Since we rent out magicians, I call us 'Rental Magica.' Ehehe, it sounds sort of cool, doesn't it?" said Mikan, puffing out her chest.

She seemed to have come straight from elementary school and she carried a red schoolbag over her *miko* outfit. No, she must have changed clothes in the office or something.

"So? What do you do, Mikan-chan?"

"Since I'm a *miko*, I get hired for groundbreaking ceremonies and festivals and stuff. That's why I'm a~ always busy in the summer."

"I see. Yeah, there are a lot of festivals in the summer, huh? So do you always come here?"

"Yep. Though, if I wasn't here, President *Onii-chan* would have been made into food for Ultros, wouldn't he? "

"Y-Yeah, sorry about that..."

Itsuki weakly waved his left hand. In his right hand, he held open the *Economics Even* You *Can Understand—How to Save and Use Money* book that Honami had lent to him (she had needed to lower the level of difficulty quite a bit for his sake).

"Meow."

"Meowoww."

"Hunh?"

The office cats were pulling at the bottom of his pants.

Being pulled along, he came to a desk with a fashion magazine placed on it. The cats pointed to the open magazine and meowed, waving their tails.

"Nekoyashiki-san, this is..."

"Aah. It's my most popular 'Nekomata Onmyoudou・Nekoyashiki Ren's Cat Fortune Telling' feature."

Nekoyashiki, who was sitting next to him, raised his head.

"... I see."

He somehow understood quite well. He seemed to be pretty popular. His personality didn't really show through in his photo, though.

Looks like there are hardships no matter what kind of world you live in.

He had a strangely familial feeling.

Nekoyashiki, with his cats on his knees, pressed his brush against his cheek. On the desk in front of him, a

heavy-looking inkstone was enshrined with some Japanese paper. He was apparently in the middle of making "spell seals".

Lightly waving his brush across the slips of paper, he made several talismans.

"Are these for work?"

"No, I send them as presents to my readers. I draw five names from the people who send in the questionnaires and give them these."

"Huh, presents..."

Itsuki's chin dropped. He was way off.

Nekoyashiki smiled at his look.

"President, what do you think about magicians?" he asked.

"Huh? Umm... I still don't know anything about them at all..."

Well, for a start, none of them looked very magical. At least not before what he saw in the park. He didn't understand the different kinds of magic very well either.

"I suppose it's best to be honest. So, I'll change the question a bit. What's the need for magicians in the modern world?"

"Eh?"

Itsuki blinked at suddenly being asked such a basic question.

"Er, um... I guess they exist out of necessity?"

"Ahaha. A no-holds-barred response. I like that. If you think about it normally, there's really no need for them at all. If you need to fly, you use an airplane. If you need to talk to someone far away, you use a telephone. And if you need a familiar, there's always Sony's AIBO. Those robots are much cuter and more functional than your typical magical beast, aren't they? Oh, but of course, cats are the exception."

Putting emphasis on the last part, Nekoyashiki then made a solemn expression.

"But magic, just by virtue of being magic, can destroy the world, you know."

Nekoyashiki declared with all the sharpness of a *katana*.

"..." Itsuki gulped involuntarily. "Is there really magic that powerful?"

"No. Because there is a human limit to spell power, all magic has its limits. For example, in the current world, the greatest flame user in the current world is Ismail Talib, a master of Islamic *Djinn* Magic. However, even he would only be able to burn down a single city at his best. Furthermore, there would need to be a lot of costly preparation before anything could be accomplished. It would probably be safer and smarter to just drop a napalm bomb on the city."

Nekoyashiki took a small sip of his green tea. It was apparently cold, as he made a disgruntled look.

"B-But monsters made with magic are pretty amazing, aren't they?"

"Ah, I see where you're going with this. Things like Kabbalic Golems and Homunculi do indeed have power greater than that of humans. The best and best known are <Goetia>'s Mathers family's 'Seventy-Two Demons.'"

Hearing the familiar name, Itsuki's face became stiff.

"Oh, what's the matter?"

"N-No, it's nothing."

Adilisia • lenn • Mathers.

That was the name of the girl who now sat to his right during class. Thought it was difficult for him to admit. Perhaps it was because of Honami, but she hadn't given him any trouble. Still, he could feel the terrible sensation that a pair of green eyes was glaring at him from time to time.

The best, huh...

As Itsuki half admired her and half feared her, Nekoyashiki continued his discussion.

"However, there is a limit even to the highest ranking demons. No matter which road the summoner takes, they can't outdo their natural ability while still being able to completely control the monster. There are ways for summoner-type magicians to make their work more efficient, but it just makes things more likely to work rather than guaranteeing anything."

"... Then, what was that magic that you said could destroy the world?"

"Oh, that..."

As Nekoyashiki nodded, the black, old-fashioned phone next to the support pillar rang.

Lifting the handset to his face in a flash, Nekoyashiki answered.

"Thank you for calling. This is the magician dispatch company <Astral>... eh? Oh, I see. Yes. Yes, yes. Understood!"

Slamming the handset back onto its cradle, Nekoyashiki whirled around.

"President! Urgent request!"

"Eh? Don't tell me it's another monster extermination!" Itsuki responded in a panic.

"No, it looks like a magazine writer is out with a cold! If we hurry, we can write the substitute article. We have to take a quick trip to the publisher and write it on-site."

— Well, that seemed pretty peaceful.

"U-Understood. Let's go."

Itsuki gave a tired laugh and turned his back to Nekoyashiki, who was placing his cats in a *furoshiki*[3] before slinging the bundle over his shoulder.

Before exiting the door, Nekoyashiki turned around.

"That's right. About what I was saying earlier..."

"Hm?"

"The most dangerous magic is... when the magician becomes the magic himself," Nekoyashiki said, narrowing his eyes into crescent moons.

Part 2

The next day, during lunch, Itsuki walked up to the curry meal... and moved on, taking the udon meal.

Among the students, the curry at this school was known as "Russian Roulette". Since there is no set kind of curry served, you could get terribly sweet curry one day and get blazingly spicy curry the next. Whether it was the spiciness of a chili pepper or the sweetness of syrup and powdered sugar, it all smelled and looked the same. There was no way to think of it as anything other than a trap.

Pushing through the waves of people, Itsuki made his way to the end of the cafeteria and sat at the empty table there.

As he read the reference book Honami had lent him while eating, "May I sit here?" came a voice that rang like a bell.

It was Adilisia. Of course, she wasn't wearing her dress in school; she had on a sailor uniform and was holding a cafeteria tray. Her golden hair and emerald

eyes clashed quite considerably with the sailor outfit and Itsuki simply blinked at her for a moment.

"... What are you gaping at like a fool?"

"N-No, I just didn't think you'd be eating the school food."

"It is my choice."

Turning her face away, she sat in front of him.

The smell of delicious curry wafted from her tray.

"Ah..."

With an elegant sweep, Adilisia brought the spoon to her mouth.

"!!!"

She swooned in agony.

"What is this!? Can't they make this curry sweeter!?"

She slammed the table. Itsuki's right eye began to hurt again. She was gathering spell power bit by bit.

"There's nothing you can do about it here..."

"Ugh!! How could I have fallen into such a trap?"

"W-Wouldn't it be best to not overdo it and just not eat the curry?"

"Be quiet. Since I made this decision, I will see it to its finish."

With teary eyes, Adilisia stuffed the suspicious curry into her cheeks.

"... Hey, look at that over there."

"... Ibaitsu made the transfer student cry."

"... I heard that Ibaitsu is her manservant, is that true?"

"... What? I heard that the transfer student was Ibaitsu's fiancée."

"... Well, what about the other transfer student?"

"... No way... are they gonna start fighting?"

At the scene, rumors began pouring out of the surrounding students.

Aw man! I'm the center of another weird misunderstanding !

Recently, Itsuki was all the class talked about. Of course, it wasn't because Itsuki himself was interesting. It was because of the people sitting to his right and left during class. That is to say, the two transfer students. Since the beautiful mixed race girl and the English lady glared at the class loon between them, it would be weird for rumors not to spring up.

Slurping his udon, Itsuki sighed.

Feeling that things were going to get worse, he was trying to think of a way to respond to the situation when the young lady who had finally finished half of her curry glanced upward.

"Itsuki."

"Yes?"

"It may be impolite of me, but please allow me to inquire. You have only recently become a company president, yes?"

"M-More or less..."

"And even though you aren't a magician?"

Her green eyes stared him down.

"N-No, though I have been doing all I can about that..." Itsuki answered, flustered. He had already stopped trying to study magic. Should he have told her the truth?

However, hearing that, Adilisia's expression changed.

"Well then... even though you aren't a magician, you are still the leader of <Astral>, that... jumbled up collection of magicians... yes?"

With a sudden sweep of silence across the cafeteria, whispers began to arise.

Because they were far away, the other students didn't catch on to words like "magician" or "leader," but what they did see was that Adilisia was quite indignant.

But as any proper young lady, Adilisia didn't pay attention to the whispers. She leaned over the table at Itsuki.

"Uwah!"

"Do you really plan on overcoming the <Night> with such a... such a careless attitude?"

Uh... <Night>?

Itsuki didn't think too much about it. He pulled back as Adilisia's white visage came nearer. She peered straight into Itsuki's eye.

"Fine."

She let go of the table. "Since you apparently are not aware of that either, I will give you a warning. If you continue with that attitude, you will die within three days."

"Die..."

Itsuki felt the coldness of those words all the way through to his heart.

"..."

"..."

For a while, the two stayed silent, simply looking at each other.

When Itsuki grabbed his chopsticks, he felt something.

"Huh?"

"What is it?"

"... Adilisia-*san*, are you, by any chance... worried for me?"

In an instant, Adilisia's face became bright red up to her ears.

"Do not say such foolish things! Since you saw things normal people are unaware of in the park last week, I was just clarifying things for you."

She stood up angrily.

"So how about now? If you value your life, you will pull out of the next offer."

Simply declaring that, the girl swiftly turned on her heel.

"Hey, wait a second."

Itsuki tried to follow her, but he suddenly felt a strange itch under his eye patch. He rubbed it, standing up.

However, he felt something wet.

"Huh?"

The finger he had rubbed under his eye patch with was dyed slightly red.

"... with that attitude, you will die within three days."

"Ugh..."

And then, seeing his own blood, Itsuki—who was anemic—fell on his back in a faint.

After school, Itsuki made his way home after being slapped awake by the school nurse.

"Hey, I want to go home, so hurry and wake up!" she insisted.

For the time being, the blood had stopped. In all truth, there really wasn't that much bleeding in the first place, and it had totally stopped by the time he had reached the infirmary. Because the nurse in the infirmary knew him well, she let him be without taking his eye patch off. Itsuki was thankful for that.

It's been a long time since I've seen blood...

Talking to himself, he walked toward downtown.

Lots of shops had already closed. There were few people on the streets and the old townscape was like a silhouette in the sunset.

The city of Furube was a mix of new and old.

It was a small town that had existed on a sloping hill since the Heian Period. Then, the bubble economy brought a population influx, turning the place into a

commuter town overnight. To add to that, the city recently began luring enterprises, bringing in a lot of hustle and bustle and causing the construction of many new buildings.

It was a laid back town, but the downtown area was in the middle of a rebirth.

As he climbed the sloping road on his way to the alleyway leading to the office, Itsuki suddenly stopped his feet.

"A-Are you here again?"

Remembering Ultros, his facial expression dropped.

That demon dog—his caretaker still hadn't taken him back so, it couldn't be helped, he was now being kept at <Astral>.

As he walked through the alleyway, it was an established practice for Ultros to playfully assault him. For example, one time Ultros had climbed to the top of the roof and dove headfirst at Itsuki, nearly crushing him to death.

When he held his eye patch and looked across the alleyway...

"You are <Astral>'s Iba Itsuki-*sama*, aren't you?"

"Wha...?"

Being spoken to from his side all of a sudden, Itsuki jumped.

Slipping through the sunset, a human figure stood before him. Itsuki should have been able to see him in his peripheral vision, but it was as if he didn't even register in Itsuki's consciousness.

It was as if the man lacked any sort of characteristic at all.

With a blank expression on his face, he wore a worn out business suit on his body, which was about average height. In his hand, he carried a normal-looking suitcase. If he were to walk into a crowd, you would immediately lose sight of him.

"Aren't you Iba Itsuki-*san*?" the man asked again.

"Eh? Ah, y-yes..."

"A~h, of course. You do look like Tsukasa-*san*," the man said, forcing a nostalgic look onto his face.

"You know my dad?"

"Yes. President Iba Tsukasa helped me a long time ago.

"Excuse me for beating around the bush. I am Kagezaki, of the <Organization>."

"<Organization>..."

He remembered Honami saying the name.

It was definitely the public controller that assembled magicians. Honami still hadn't told him the details, but he had heard that it was an association that presided over more than a hundred magical groups.

"Right now, I would like to congratulate you on your succession. We await your future patronage."

"Y-Y-Yes, nice to meet you and all that... but why is someone from the <Organization> here?"

"It's about the contract."

Smiling calmly, Kagezaki held up the suitcase.

"Contract?"

Remembering what Adilisia had told him, his cheeks became stiff.

"Is there a problem?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing that important, but... Ahahaha!" He broke out in a cold sweat. "Well, uh, let me take you inside the office..."

"There won't be any need for that, President."

All of a sudden, he was interrupted by another presence in the alleyway.

"Nekoyashiki-*san*!"

"Oh, Nekoyashiki-*sama*. It has been a while."

In the alleyway at twilight stood a gray-haired, young man—Nekoyashiki. In his peculiar Japanese clothes, with his folding fan, his chest and shoulders covered in cats, he was the same as usual.

However, his face looked somewhat perturbed to Itsuki.

"Kagezaki-*san*. You received the communication that we were waiting for the offer, correct?"

"Yes. That is what this is about." Keeping his smile, Kagezaki nodded. "The truth is that earlier, the offer contract was terminated by <Goetia>-*sama*. According to the rules, if <Astral>-*sama* does not formally reject this claim, they will have to withdraw from the next <Night>. "

"I know that."

Nekoyashiki fluttered his folding fan.

He didn't hide the fact that he did not like Kagezaki. Itsuki felt a bit surprised at this, Nekoyashiki was usually subtle.

Kagezaki lips drew out into a full grin.

"Ah, then that works out wonderfully. You know <Astral> has not accepted an offer for six years, right? If you refuse this one as well, I will have to consider terminating your registry with the <Organization>." Acting as if he really regretted it, Kagezaki continued. "If that happens, you know that Itsuki-*san* will be back to the way he was before and Nekoyashiki-*san* and Mikan-*san* will have to return to their former positions, right?"

"Huh?"

Former positions?

As Itsuki blinked confusedly, Nekoyashiki wore a grim expression.

"I know that. I know we have to do this job to keep our place in the registry. That's what you're saying, yes?"

"Yes, more or less."

Kagezaki put on a troubled smile.

His smile gave no impression. Like a movie extra whose presence or lack thereof made no difference, his face was completely spiritless.

...

Suddenly, Itsuki became afraid.

His slight confusion changed to uneasiness, and that uneasiness morphed into terror. Like with Adilisia, it wasn't a clear abnormality. However, Kagezaki seemed so average that it made him suspicious.

— It was as if his face was bleached.

Itsuki gulped. Feeling something cold on the back of his neck, he finally opened his mouth to speak.

"Please w-wait for just a minute. I can't figure this conversation out. What do you mean by terminating our registration? What 'job' are you talking about?"

"What?" Kagezaki shifted his gaze toward Itsuki. "You mean all of this hasn't been explained to you?"

"It hasn't been two weeks since he's succeeded the role of president," Nekoyashiki answered.

With a smile of understanding, Kagezaki nodded.

"If that's the case, then why don't I explain? Otherwise. .."

Kagezaki smiled again.

However, the one who answered him this time was not Nekoyashiki or Itsuki.

At the bottom of the sloping road, two new characters were walking that way.

While Itsuki was in the infirmary, Honami had left school and appeared to be coming back from shopping.

"Kagezaki *oji-san*..."

Mikan was next to her holding a plastic supermarket bag, tugging at the hem of her sailor uniform, shivering.

She stepped in front of Mikan.

"I'll tell you about it," Honami Takase Ambler said flatly.

Part 3

"--Well then, I'll place the documents here. There are also reference documents for the next case, so please read through them."

Placing his trunk on the table and making a bow, Kagezaki stood up and left. He didn't disappear or fly away like a magician, he stood up on his two feet and walked down the hill road outside.

Until his shape disappeared, a pair of harsh Ice Blue Eyes glared at him.

"President, shall I take that trunk for you?" Honami prompted.

"Oh, sure. ...Mikan-chan, is it safe?" Itsuki, taking the trunk, asked Mikan, who had been hiding.

"Yeah, it's safe..." With a pale face, Mikan nodded stiffly. Her hands were still shivering. She tugged on

Itsuki's school uniform. "Not! Uwaaaah!" Tears began to tumble out of her eyes, and she buried her face in Itsuki's stomach. "Uuu... I'm scared... I'm scared--..."

"A-ah, I understand, I understand..."

He decided against telling her not to rub her runny nose all over him and nervously stroked her head.

"*H-hic*, president onii-chan... waaaah... was bullied by oji-san..."

"Uh... yes?"

Confused, Itsuki wiped Mikan's cheeks. She had cried quite a bit, and her tears had streaked down to his pants.

As he did,

"... Hmph."

For some reason, Honami was looking at him with horribly cold eyes.

"Wh-what?"

"Nothing. So you're interested in that type, huh? I guess it's up to you."

"Wh-why are you saying something like that?"

"Forget about it. I'll leave you two alone."

Nekoyashiki intervened with his calm-as-usual tone.

"Now then, how about we return to the office first?"

"Meowo~ww"

Nekoyashiki's cats meowed in agreement with one another.

A few minutes later.

Inside of <Astral>'s messy office, the smell of black tea wafted faintly through the air.

"Here you go, Mikan-chan."

"Thanks Honami."

Taking the white teacup, Mikan made a tiny slurp.

Incidentally, Itsuki had changed out of his soggy school uniform into regular clothes. Because Ultros licked him all over every day, he sadly had to keep a spare set of clothes at the office.

"H-hey, what about me?"

"Oh, are you here?"

"... S-sorry..." Itsuki said, lowering his head.

A little while later, a teacup was held out to him.

He was at the reception table. He sat next to Mikan on the creaky antique sofa. Nekoyashiki was a little further away at his desk, and Honami was sitting in front of Itsuki in a Windsor chair, placing her own teacup before her.

After a short pause,

"Now then, back to what I was saying before..."

"Oh, yeah," Itsuki nodded.

He didn't understand any of the earlier discussion, about the offer, or the registry, or the <Night>. There was something about former positions too.

"So, I'll explain everything to you in order," Honami said, putting the rim of her teacup to her mouth. Apparently she had been studying in England until a little while ago, and her motions were very similar to Adilisia's.

Taking a single sip of the amber-colored liquid, Honami began to talk.

"I already told you about the <Organization>, right?"

"That one structure affiliated with seventy or eighty percent of magician groups, wasn't it? <Astral>'s part of it too, right?"

Seemingly satisfied with Itsuki's answer, Honami nodded.

"Right. Both <Astral> and <Goetia> are registered. In the beginning, it was a support union made by magicians in Europe in the Middle Ages. They could never intervene in anything directly, but they had a lot of

influence worldwide. For example, if you weren't formally registered with the <Organization>, no one would treat you like a real magician."

Giving a simple review, Honami looked at Itsuki.

This was review, right? If he said that he couldn't remember something, he didn't know what kind of horrible things she'd put him through, so he nodded obediently.

"Alright then, I'll continue. --Offers are 'jobs' accepted from the public by the <Organization>, which are then directed to its registered magical groups."

"'Jobs?'" Itsuki asked.

"Yes, 'jobs.' I just told you that the <Organization> could never intervene in anything directly. That's because the different magical groups are very sensitive to their spheres of influence. If someone idiotically sticks their nose in someone else's domain, it could turn into a fight. That's why the <Organization> recruits magicians who can solve such problems."

That is to say, in exchange for not getting your own hands dirty, you dispatched others capable of solving

various issues. That seemed like what a support union would do.

After thinking for a moment, Itsuki opened his mouth.

"Then, that guy Kagezaki came because--"

"A 'job.' --The <Organization> is seeking to resolve some issue that's popped up."

"...!"

At Honami's words, Itsuki could feel his blood rush through him.

Whatever this 'job' could be, there was one thing that was certain.

"W-woah, time out! Wait a second! Then, Adilisia came--"

"Because <Goetia> took the offer. If <Astral> takes the offer as well, then the reward is first come, first serve. That is to say, we'll be fighting one another."

Itsuki got goose bumps.

He remembered the fear that Adilisia had instilled in him. If magicians were fighting...

"T-then, you mean... with... magic?"

"Naturally. We're magicians."

Honami made the finishing blow. Itsuki dropped his head as though he were a marionette whose neck string had been cut.

"President?"

"No, that's..."

There was no going back now. It was only a matter of time before a gruesome death.

On the other hand, the girl across from him made a small sigh.

"You know, you're the one who's supposed to decide whether or not we take on offers, right?"

"Huh?" Suddenly, Itsuki's face sparkled. "That's it then! Let's take a pass on this one..."

"--Let me return to what we were discussing before."

Nekoyashiki, who was dandling his cats, gave a warning from his desk.

"What?"

"Ah, there is a certain reason... how should I put this? This could turn into a long story, but unlike other magical societies, <Astral> isn't a simple magical group. Our last president forcibly pulled in several different kinds of magicians. That is to say, we're like a hodge podge of different magicians..."

Itsuki felt as though Adilisia had told him something similar before. Something like "jumbled up collection"...

"What do you mean?" Itsuki knitted his brows.

"To put it simply, if <Astral> is removed from the registry, Nekoyashiki-san and Mikan-chan will have to go back to their original groups," Honami chimed in.

"H-hunh?"

"<Astral> hasn't taken any offers since the last president disappeared. The <Organization> can't keep an

association like that in their registry. That's what Kagezaki was threatening earlier."

An awkward silence spread across the room.

"U-um..."

Finally, Itsuki looked around.

"... President onii-chan... I don't want to go back." Mikan looked up at him from beside, holding her teacup with both hands.

"....."

"Meow."

"Meeow!"

"Me~ow."

Meowow~ow."

The cats began to exert pressure from all sides of the office.

"....."

"Aren't they cute? They're the treasures of the world, the finest art this earth has borne. However, I can't take this many cats back home with me. Aah, you're not telling me that you would rather these cats die, are you?"

Putting on a drama, Nekoyashiki lamented exaggeratedly.

"....."

"What're you gonna do, president?" Honami・ Takase Ambler asked him coldly, persisting.

"....."

Itsuki felt as though something similar had happened not half a month ago.

"... O-okay... I get it..."

Almost crying, Itsuki slammed the table.

Though he had come this far, he was still a total novice. --Or rather, even he hadn't thought it would get this bad.

He made a deep, deep sigh, expelling everything in his lungs.

Then, he puffed his chest out, partly out of desperation.

"Okay then, what kind of 'job' are we doing this time?" he asked, crying.

Part 4

The place had been called the "goblin factory" before.

Everyone in Furube City knew of the smokestacks rising from halfway up Mt. Nyuu.

Around it was a red, rusty barb-wire fence, and the vacant space between the fence and the factory was

overrun with weeds. The outer concrete wall had cracks here and there, and they were a strange color, as if a demon had slashed at the wall with its claws.

The place had been sealed off several decades before. As was often the case when a business failed, the factory head and his family had all hung themselves, and the land was abandoned, leaving the building to slowly rot away.

Incidentally, there were scary stories about how if one listened closely, they could hear the factory head that killed himself creeping about at night, or the sound of machines that should have been destroyed working as usual.

Itsuki was at the entrance of this factory.

Furthermore--the air of the tepid summer night felt bizarre.

"... gh..."

"President onii-chan? What's wrong?"

"No, that's... it's... nothing, nothing at all..."

Walking one step behind Mikan, grasping the cuff of her Miko clothes, he made an awkward smile and shook his head.

Since they had entered the mountain, his knees had been shaking nonstop. He wanted to praise himself for making it this far. Incidentally, Mikan was a surprisingly good walker, so she hadn't sweated a drop the whole way up the mountain road.

Mikan tilted her neck.

"Are you scared?"

"Geh!"

Straight pitch.

Fast ball.

Mikan was right on the money.

"Mfufufu, it's okay. I'll protect you, president onii-chan."

Laughing into her nose, she waved her tamagushi with a triumphant air.

"P, protect...?"

"You know..." She pressed the tamagushi against her cheek, starting to explain herself,

"--Mikan, enough chit-chat, how about that misogi?"[4] Honami cut in from beside.

Honami was wearing her sailor uniform as usual. However, she had a large pointed hat over her chestnut-colored hair, and she wore a night-colored cape across her skinny shoulders. She was like a witch from a fairy tale, the same as Itsuki had seen her in the park.

"Al-right!"

Pointing her lips, Mikan waved her tamagushi here and there across her miko clothes and fingers. This was apparently a misogi.

Making sure Mikan was occupied, Honami turned to Itsuki.

"President. Hand me your badge so I can do the preparations."

"Uh... this thing?"

Itsuki fished his badge out of his pocket and held it out to Honami. She grabbed it from him and held it up to the moonlight, then fastened it to Itsuki's collar.

Tilting his neck to the side, Itsuki caught a glimpse of Honami's splendidly white nape.

A faint scent slipped into his nostrils.

"Ah..."

His cheeks became hot.

"Hm, what?"

"N, no, it's nothing. Nothing at all. What's this?"

"Basically, protection. The holy pentagram is strengthened by the divine nature of the silver mirror. This kind of thing is used in both the east and west, so it has some ability to overcome spell wave interference. There's some more ways to use it, but I'll tell you later. -- Now, this,"

"Oh, business cards..."

Tucked away in a thin, silver case was a stack of business cards. Furthermore, neatly embossed next to the words <Magician Dispatch Company・ Astral> was " Company President Iba Itsuki."

"Wh, why are you suddenly giving me this?"

"Oh, I finished purifying those business cards!" Mikan butted in, puffing her chest out.

"After we finished washing out the paper with the miracle water of Fuji, Mikan purified it with a ceremony. Inside of them is the Kabbalah Cross that the head of the Fetish Department, Hazel, carved. Since every single one of them has a real fetish in it, don't go around giving them to everyone."

"S, sure."

Who was he supposed to give these to, then?

--He felt like he was treading deeper and deeper into the swamp.

"Then... what were the preparations you were talking about?" he fearfully asked.

Honami narrowed her eye at him from behind her glasses.

"I'm deciding that now. Before the 'job' starts, I have to give you something to protect yourself, so that I can properly cover you."

"B, but... I don't see anything strange right now," he protested flusteredly.

He could see monsters, but he didn't know for sure if this place was a real spirit spot or not. Looking from his right eye, it seemed like just a regular old creepy place.

Even so, what he really feared was that--the lack of knowledge. He didn't know whether or not to be afraid. He pitied himself a bit.

"It's here."

Honami let loose a grin, looking down at the watch on her wrist.

"There are definitely ley lines here, but they're small. This is a dragon cave. If it's as the reference docs say,

then the 'Night' will be here very soon. Just thirty seconds left on the clock... twenty-nine... twenty-eight... twenty-seven..."

"Huh?"

"... Seventeen... sixteen... fifteen..."

Her soft countdown echoed across the ruined factory in the mountain recess.

The numbers traveled across the night air, taking on a strange feel as if they were a spell themselves.

"..."

Itsuki, unable to move, gulped.

"Eight... seven... six..."

The countdown ran into the single digits.

"Five... four... three..."

Mikan gazed at the entrance of the factory.

"... Two... one..."

Creeeak!

--Itsuki's right eye twisted.

"... Wh, what!?"

He felt his eyepatch.

All of a sudden, the world had changed.

No, that wasn't it.

It wasn't a feeling of anything that changed.

It was as if the world had reverted to a former state--an unpleasant sense of déjà-vu. There was an enormous spell power. It felt as though an explosion had occurred inside his right eye.

"Mee~ow."

"Spell wave pollution--confirming a shift from class six to class three. Just like the reference docs said," Nekoyashiki sighed, stroking the cat he was holding against his chest.

"... The Magi Night has begun," the witch with the Ice Blue Eyes finally declared.

*

Adilisia・ Lenn Mathers felt a sudden burst of pressure assail her body. She had a sensation of gravity suddenly becoming stronger. The spell power that diffused across every inch of her body reverberated against the ground violently.

"... gh!"

Gripping the pentagram of Solomon over her chest, she pushed back the spell power in a single breath. Withstanding the feeling that her blood was flowing backwards, the girl lifted open her red lips.

"--The <Night> has come."

She stood on the other side of the factory. It went without saying that she knew each member of <Astral> had arrived as well.

Behind her, ten people in black clothes stood by.

They each held pentagrams of Solomon over their chests as well, and were wearing rings to provide spiritual protection. These were Adilisia's handpicked apprentices of <Goetia> that she had taken with her for work in Japan.

"I will confirm the 'job' one last time," Adilisia whispered, gazing at the factory without turning around.

She spoke in a small voice, but the magicians were not ones to let any of her words escape them. If they messed

up one single pronunciation or had even the slightest error in their tone of voice, it would completely change the meaning of their spells.

"The request from the <Organization> is to obliterate this <Night>. Without drawing the eyes of anyone, without allowing any injuries to occur, we must seal it in darkness under the cover of darkness. <Astral> is likely thinking this as well."

Adilisia's voice sounded out delicately.

It was like the voice of some beautiful bird.

"However, this time, that is not our aim."

The black clothes--the apprentices, gently lowered their heads. Age made no difference. To a magician, the difference in rank was absolute.

Their rank was 3=8 and 4=7. As the rank of those with regular genius and strong effort, you could say their rank was the highest. Even so, they were a long shot from Adilisia.

It was because of her blood.

Naturally, plain old genius meant nothing in magic.

If having strange powers and being outside of the norm was proof of a magician, then the ones who stand on top are necessarily those who are separated from people from the beginning. As much as a lifetime of hard work was meaningless, the collected bloodlines of thousands of years--that tenacity, was what bore the forbidden fruit of magic.

Adilisia had been a magician since before she was born .

That is why she spoke so magnificently to the apprentices that she stood above.

"We will retrieve... our elder. For that purpose, we will use any means, and any magic. Use your spell power for only this purpose until your very last drop of life."

Without so much as a cough, the black clothes lowered their heads again.

It was the same landscape as always.

It was the same view as always.

This kind of mechanical exchange was natural for a magical group.

"Do you understand?"

Suddenly, the face of an idiot, the leader of another magical group, hovered in her head. Adilisia bit her lip.

"I warned you. --If only you had not gotten yourself involved in this <Night>..."

1. ↑ Someone without a family history of spiritual power who gains an ability like "second sight" or "fairy sight" in Western lore; usually due to an eye injury.
2. ↑ Someone born with "second/fairy sight".
3. ↑ In this instance, using a furoshiki to carry a bundle.
4. ↑ A misogi (禊) is a kind of Shintou purification rite.

Chapter 3 - <Night> of the Magician

Part 1

Itsuki was in the sky.

"Owowowowow--!"

"President, hold onto the broom with your butt or your knees. I told you it would hurt if you slacken!" Honami, who was sitting in front of him, warned in a cold voice. However, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get himself straight.

"E, even if you say that, the broom is digging in between my legs... owow!"

Itsuki grabbed onto Honami's slender back, pressed his knees together tightly, and screamed.

He was on a broom.

He had been seated on the back of Honami's broom and taken away into the sky. Some might envy his position, but such a thought didn't cross Itsuki's mind for even a nanosecond.

"It's because your nerves are so sensitive from not exercising."

Trying to regain his posture, Itsuki was met with those frank words.

"It can't be helped. I've never practiced riding on a broom," he responded sullenly.

"Ah."

"Wh, what?"

"That's the first time you've talked back."

Honami chuckled.

Feeling a little awkward, Itsuki hesitated to speak.

"It's fine. You won't mature without that sort of thing. However, you should save it for now. --Look over there."

She pointed straight at the ground.

Below the pointing nail of her supple, quivering finger was the sprawling expanse of the goblin factory.

"... gh."

"Do you understand? Hey."

Honami asked again to Itsuki, who had swallowed his breath.

"... Y, yeah. It's swirling."

At the center of the factory, a mass of spell power was swirling like a typhoon. When he had seen it from the ground, he had only noticed that the factory had changed appearance, but if he looked from this point, he could understand more clearly.

Honami nodded and continued.

"That is the beginning of... a <Night>."

"<Night>?"

"Basically, it's a storm of spell power that runs ley lines . It's because spell power is an easily alterable form of energy. What controls that altercation is magic, but--if you just leave it there, it'll quickly turn into something strange. This is spell wave pollution. It's best to think about a <Night> as an incredibly huge version of this spell wave pollution."

Itsuki blinked at Honami's words.

"Spell wave... pollution?"

"Take a look."

The girl pointed with her oak staff.

At about the same time, the spell power changed even further.

--First, a smokestack was twisted.

As it bent flexibly like fired glass, the concrete of the factory became transparent. A white wave boiled up from the empty ground overrun by weeds, and with a crashing roar, the entire grounds of the factory was washed away by a huge wave of water.

It was only about a hundred square meters, but--it truly was a black ocean.

"The mountain... into an ocean...?!"

"It's because this mountain used to be a seafloor. It's 'remembering' that time. Recurrence is a popular phenomenon for <Night>s, though this one's kinda small."

Pushing up her pointed hat, Honami narrowed her eyes.

Itsuki remained in a shocked state.

He still couldn't believe the scene he was looking down upon. With a snap, he opened his eye wide, remembering something.

"That's right... what about Mikan-chan?"

In a flurry, he looked down.

Then, he dropped his jaw again.

At the surface around Mikan, who was waving her arms around--the water had receded in a circle of space

about eight meters in diameter. It was an unnatural space that seemed like it had been cut out of the air.

{We're fine down here!}

"Huh?"

Suddenly, he heard Nekoyashiki's voice from behind him. Immediately after, he turned to see a white cat holding on to his shoulder.

"B, Byakko-kun?"

It was Nekoyashiki's cherished, pure-white kitten. Through some sort of contrivance, whenever a "Meorw" came from its throat, Nekoyashiki's voice could be heard at the same time.

{Ahaha. I had him cling to your back at the beginning, but didn't you notice? Were you surprised? Did I scare you?}

"I, I didn't realize it..."

At Itsuki's astonishment, Byakko-kun puffed up with pride. Up in the sky on a broom like that, he was indeed a cat, but also a handy tool.

{Rather than 'shikigami,' this could be called 'shikineko .' --Right. We're fine over here thanks to Mikan-san's spirit barrier.}

"Mikan-chan's?"

{Yes, yes. The special magic ability of Shintou is entirely to purify uncleanliness with <misogi>, after all. If Mikan-san overlaps her spell power, then even smack dab in the middle of spell wave pollution, we can get a perfectly sealed paradise. Thanks to her, I can completely focus on Byakko-kun,} Nekoyashiki--or rather, Byakko-kun speaking with Nekoyashiki's voice, said, waving around his vast stock of knowledge.

"Special magic ability?"

{Yes, I told you a bit about it earlier. Magical arts are all used to manipulate spell power. So, depending on the method of manipulation used, certain specialties and weaknesses arise. For Mikan-san's Shintou, there's the spirit barrier, and for my Onmyoudou, there's shikigami--these things are beyond the control of a familiar. These kinds of things are special magic abilites.}

Skillfully bending his forelegs, Byakko-kun managed to bow.

"Oh, I see. Like how you said one could specialize in summoning magic."

{Yes, like that. Even so, there are of course loopholes, and personal differences exist as well, so it's not absolute. Eventually, though, whatever the magical art, practitioners of magic all end up in similar positions--}

"Nekoyashiki-san, you're talking too much."

{Oh, excuse me.}

"... I was planning to explain all that to him," the girl sighed so quietly that no one else could hear. She then changed the subject, asking something else. "So, have you found the core of this <Night>?"

{Ah, just now I tried to divine it, but it didn't work out. The density of the spell power is too high compared to the scope, so I'm working on it. If I we don't get close enough then we won't be able to recognize it.}

"The core of the <Night>?" Itsuki asked.

"I told you earlier, right? That this is natural magic."

"Oh, yeah."

"That's why..."

{That is to say, if there's magic and spell wave pollution, then there's a core that is manipulating spell power. Whether with curses, or ceremonies, or magic circles, or with seals--whatever, it could be anything. The method to dispel it would be the same, so it would naturally be prudent for us to locate the core fastest and destroy it. It would be quite a chore even without < Goetia> around.}

"Hey, Nekoyashiki-san!"

Honami became deep red and turned around.

{Oh, sorry about that. When I'm asked something, I end up wanting to explain it to the end. Ahaha.}

The girl snorted slightly, glaring at the joyfully laughing white cat.

Then,

"So, did you understand all of that?" she asked Itsuki.

"Ah... y, yeah. Generally."

"I see."

Honami stared at his face for a moment, but then finally turned forward.

"Oh, that's right. If we... fail to dispel the <Night>, what happens then?"

"It's just like a storm. Until the <Night> ends, it'll continue to rampage violently. Just like the name says, they pretty much disappear in the morning, though in certain nasty situations they can wipe out a whole region, similar to what happened to the Tungus."

"..."

Ignoring Itsuki, who was at a loss for words, Honami gently ran her finger across the broom.

"Nekoyashiki-san. I'm going to approach the <Night>, so tell me a route with little spell wave pollution."

{Yes, yes. I'll use katatagae[1]. If we go by the flow of today's stars and ley lines... we should enter from the south south west side...}

Nekoyashiki's voice flowed through.

Following his directions, the broom took a nosedive toward the water's surface.

*

"Sustaining a Shintou ooharai[2] barrier, using Onmyoudou katatagae to confirm a route, and then having Honami use Celtic magic to search... how inefficient," Adilisia sighed at the edge of the phantom sea as the waves pummeled the shore.

"Allocating different roles to several types of magic is nothing but a loss of spell power, time, and ability."

One of the apprentices behind her nodded.

"Not to mention, they cannot support each other with differing magical abilities. Why are they even a magical group? It pains me to try to understand them," she said in a vexed manner. She turned around.

The preparations were already finished.

On the ground behind her, a large, purified paper was placed, with the sanctified names beginning in EHYEH and ending in LEVANAH written on it, along with a magic circle and several triangles and stars of David.

"Begin."

At the girl's words, the apprentices who were on standby began to chant.

"... I do invocate and conjure thee."

"... I do invocate and conjure thee."

All members whispering the same words, they grasped the "pentagrams of Solomon" to their chests.

"... I do strongly command thee, by Beralanensis, Baldachiensis, Paumachia, and Apologle Sedes: by the most Powerful Princes, Genii, Lichide, and Ministers of the Tartarean Abode: and by the Chief Prince of the Seat of Apologia in the Ninth Legion--"

Monotonously, they continued on, speaking nothing but the long spell. Conjuring up images of snakes and spirals, the words slowly flowed out, and acted as if to arrest the stars in the night sky.

Finally.

Within the magic circle, a white ether body floated lightly.

"I will show you how <Goetia> does things, Honami."

Adilisia raised her lips.

Her golden hair fluttering in the moonlight, the girl proudly chanted.

"Respond to my order, Shax! Great Marquis supporting thirty armies!"

Part 2

It looked scary even if you saw it from above, but if you were to pull in closer, it would truly seem like a haunt of the wicked.

Here and there across the ocean were large whirlpools, shooting up violent currents of water like geysers. The surface of the water reflected the pitch-black color of the sky, occasionally changing to red, blue, or some impossible color to reflect the shadows of the monsters lurking below the water's surface.

Floating near the verge of this haunt were two people and one animal.

"Wh, what's this...?"

Itsuki moaned, having finally recovered from his vertigo.

{A primordial sea--though somewhat unique, as it looks like it's been quite polluted with spell power,}

Nekoyashiki's voice chimed in from beside. Honami, putting her hand to the back of her neck, looked down at the demonic ocean.

"It's deeper than I thought. It seems like it'll take some effort to find the core."

"This 'core' thing... where would it be?"

"I dunno. But its form should be changed into something in the sea, so it might be a fish, or a stone at the ocean floor. Moreover--"

"Moreover?"

Honami turned toward the summit of the mountain.

"--It looks like they've set up their resources over there."

From that direction, tens--no, hundreds of black pigeons were flapping toward them. Furthermore, each and every one of their feathers was emitting a deep, black spell power. These were clearly not normal pigeons.

Itsuki changed his expression.

"... Are those by any chance... Adilisia's?"

{Yep, that's Shax--one of the seventy-two demons of Solomon, used for searching out hidden things. It looks like they plan on finding the core, obstructing us all the while.}

"That's so like Addie, to evoke something so troublesome. --President, hold on tight to the broom, and the cat."

"Wh, what are you doing?"

"Bite your tongue."

Suddenly, the swarm of pigeons began to close in on them.

The countless eyes stained with maliciousness sought the weakest target first--Itsuki.

"... eegh!"

Faster than he could scream, sharp beaks began to approach his eyeball, but--

Suddenly.

The two burst forward with the broom.

"-----Waaaaaaah!!!"

"Meeeeeowww!"

The broom instantaneously sped straight ahead so forcefully that Itsuki felt as though his organs were being wrenched from their positions and flung out of his mouth.

Rustle rustle rustle rustle!

The broom pierced the center of the black pigeons.

It was as if the broom was a single arrow. Just like a cloud, the flock of black pigeons split into two parts. Another word for a comet is "houkiboshi," and that was certainly true in this case.[3]

Slicing through the night sky, Itsuki and Honami soared toward the moon. Just as they flew into the upper-air, Honami's hand grew misty.

"Above me is the goddess of the moon! That is the one holding the divine protection of moonlight and mistletoe who will not oppose the curse of the north!"

As she chanted the spell, mistletoe spears rained down !

"JQWZYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

The flock of black pigeons let out an indescribable scream.

A fire arose, and a chunk of the swarm was destroyed.

However, the black pigeons showed no care for the wellbeing of their friends, and the flock split into three groups. One headed into the ocean, one swept across the surface of the water, and the remaining group returned to the sky, rushing toward Itsuki and Honami.

Then, the flock of black pigeons spread their wings and let out another strange cry.

"President, cover your ears!"

"ZWQTYUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!"

In ancient times, it was said that a dog's bark was blessed with the power to fend off evil spirits.

As for these black pigeons, it was the exact opposite--these were twisted, evil voices that let out curses causing people to be rotted to the bone.

"...!"

The black pigeons chased after the spinning, falling broom with cries of delight.

They had become a single body, as if they were one, giant monster. The monster opened its jaw, and extended its tongue to devour the small broom and the humans.

However.

Just before they reached, the broom turned up at a steep angle.

Drawing a brilliant half-circle, the broom turned around at the halfway point, and zoomed off in the opposite direction of the black pigeons.

{Oho, an immelmann・ turn!}

Held against Itsuki's chest, the white cat's eyes sparkled.

Immelmann・ turn.

It was an aerial combat technique developed during the Second World War. However, for a witch to have mastered it was unthinkable!

"I will repeat! Holding the protection of the moon and mistletoe, destroy the calamity in the northeast!"

The spears, just before striking the flock directly, split into four parts.

The separated parts of the mistletoe spears sliced through the feathers of the black pigeons. In a moment, the pigeons stopped moving, and then immediately burst into balls of flame, dropping down toward the black surface of the ocean.

Honami first made sure that there were no more of the flock alive, and then let out a deep sigh.

"They were pretty low-quality, as expected. Are you alright, president?"

"I'm... just a little... sick from all the moving..." Itsuki nodded with a blue face, holding his hand over his mouth. It was a wonder that he hadn't been thrown off.

After it was all over, his tongue hurt, he felt sick, and he was in a mess.

"That's great. If you were even a second too late with covering your ears, your heart might have stopped by now."

"...!"

Causing Itsuki to faint in agony from just one word, Honami looked over the surface of the water.

The remaining Shax flapping their wings over the black water seemed to make it even blacker. They made Itsuki think of ants squirming in dirt.

{Hey, what are we going to do?}

"There's a huge difference in our numbers. If we take them head-on, then the core will definitely be taken by Addie."

Honami made a rare frown and sighed.

"Is the 'job' of making the <Night> end really that important?" Itsuki asked from behind.

{Huh?}

"Eh?" Honami replied.

Suddenly, her eyes grew stern.

"You still don't understand, president."

"No, no, that's not what I meant! I get that if <Astral> doesn't finish this offer, we'll get erased from the registry, but... isn't Adilisia the same?"

"Addie is..."

Honami fumbled around with her words.

I definitely didn't think that he'd come this far without being serious, but...

Even though they were the same demons, depending on the spell power and ceremonies, their abilities could greatly increase or decrease. For Shax to have been

evoked to the point that there was a flock of pigeons, a substantial amount of fetishes and power would have to have been expended.

<Goetia>.

Even among the magic group's large ranks, there were a select few among them who were the far off descendants of Solomon.

However, was this "work" something that required such a strenuous effort on <Goetia>'s part?

Honami didn't understand.

A <Night>, after all, was a natural disaster consisting of spell power.

From the scale of the damage, the <Organization> handled the assignment of a rank to the "work," but in this case, the recompense wasn't very large for the amount of effort required. She didn't think the 'work' had the kind of merit that would cause <Goetia> to push away <Astral>.

Or... is there something there?

She followed her suspicion.

Was there something wrapped up in this <Night>?

"Honami?"

"I don't understand. What do you think, Nekoyashiki-san?'

Honami expressed her opinion frankly.

{Hmm... If you compare it to a standard <Night>, there's definitely an artificial feel to it... What do you think, Mikan-san?}

{I don't understand it. I'm no good at analyzing spell power.}

The sound of Mikan sulking could be heard from Byakko-kun's throat.

{I see, well, we'll handle the analytics on this side, you guys find the core--}

Then,

"--I cannot let you do that."

A cold voice echoed across the night air.

Directly below the broom was the demonic ocean of the <Night> that was periodically changing color.

In that ocean, a giant silver chimaera[4] was floating. Its craggy, rocklike face bared a set of fearsomely long fangs. Unlike a similar shark, its fangs looked like they could rip apart a whale.

And then, from its flat back, a golden-haired girl looked upward.

"Addie."

"Adilisia."

At Itsuki and Honami's words, the girl's red lips twisted into a complacent smile.

"Since my apprentices told me to, I tried letting you have a go at finding the core, but in the end it did not buy us any time. I am fine with that, this way is more exciting anyway."

She made a lovely smile.

Like smiling before plucking a flower, it was a smile injected with deadly poison. Shivering from cold sweat, Itsuki blinked.

"Well then, are we gonna fight directly this time? With your Forneus," Honami asked coldly.

Forneus was apparently the name of the silver chimaera that Adilisia was riding. Even though it was beyond Itsuki's eye patch, he could perceive that Forneus ' spell power was incomparable to Shax's earlier.

It wasn't a simple comparison of amounts.

It was an issue of dimensions. If the black pigeons were hundreds of carelessly gathered knives, then this silver chimaera was machine gun that could cause a massacre by itself--it was that kind of difference.

"With this little darling? Unthinkable. I will not do any such thing."

Faster than Itsuki could relax, Adilisia smiled again, holding up a brass container with her right hand.

"I do not underestimate you that much," she called out.

"Come forth, Marbas. King who rules over thirty-six armies!"

In the raging ocean waters, a golden lion stood towering over everything around it.

"Come forth, Glasya・ Bolas. Powerful count commanding thirty-six armies!"

Underneath the moon flapped a wolf with the wings of an eagle.

"Come forth, Eligol! Firm knight governing sixty armies !"

Finally, next to the girl, a silver knight holding a spear and a snake appeared.

"Th, three of them!?"

Itsuki grabbed his eye patch, flailing backward.

Along with Forneus, that was four demons. Studying the demons in his sight, his right eye hurt as if it were being ripped out of its socket.

With just that, he was able to understand.

--This was different.

Forget the black pigeons, even Forneus was an unfavorable comparison to the three that stood before him. They gave off a demonic presence, as if just by existing they could make a human go insane.

The lion, the wolf, and the knight.

Especially the third one, the knight...

Adilisia, looking up, gave an elegant smile.

"These are the very best of the seventy-two demons, the evil spirits of blood and war. With this, we can start having fun."

"I'm happy you think so highly of me. How many years did it take you to evoke those?"

"Oh, roughly a year and a half. I am glad to have the opportunity to hear your opinion of them."

"It's a real privilege," Honami exaggerated.

However, this time, her usual confidence was smeared with the color of a bluff.

{Ho, Honami-san? Wait a second, do you really plan on going against her in your current condition?} the white cat whispered to Honami from Itsuki's arms.

"... I know. But I can't think to just let her get away freely."

Her voice was distressed.

Adilisia threw her hand to the side horizontal to her chest.

"Well then, my demons have worked up quite an appetite. Eat all that you like!"

The thread of the thirst for blood loosely connected the two girls.

It was a replay of what had happened one week ago at night in the park.

However, who was on the offense and who was on the defense had completely switched. That time, Adilisia had said that it was "not the time or place for this." Itsuki now understood what she meant. She had always been waiting for this opportunity.

"..."

Itsuki's throat was completely parched.

Goosebumps sprang up all over his body, and a chill began to expand in him as though his blood vessels had been turned into dry ice.

However.

"--W, wait a minute, Adilisia-san."

Ah...

Itsuki suddenly held his hand to his mouth.

He didn't have the intention to interfere. Even so, his mouth had moved on its own. Adilisia's face loosened just a bit upon seeing her panicking classmate.

"Oh my."

However, her face immediately returned to its former frigidity.

"What on earth could you be thinking? I warned you, you know. I told you to pull out of this offer."

"That, that's..."

There was no way he could say he forgot.

"What is the matter?"

"Ah, no, it's just... why is this 'work' so important to you? If there's a reason, we might be able to cooperate."

"..."

Adilisia, took a deep breath after a long silence.

"I have no reason to tell you that. Still more, I have no weapons to lend to magicians," she declared clearly.

It was a complete rejection.

"Thanks, president. --It's alright," Honami whispered gently to Itsuki, who couldn't manage to say anything.

And then.

The two witches confronted one another.

"...!!!"

Itsuki realized with horror that the cold atmosphere from earlier was better than this.

He remembered what Honami had said to him before.

--Once a true battle between magicians begins, it's already over.

--Eh, why?

--No matter what kind of magic you use, there's a certain amount of preparation required. There's almost no kind of magic that just needs spells and movements to be used. It's like a card game where you compete with limited hands. The fight is generally decided by who brought the better cards.

That is to say, the next chant was it.

Rather than when the actual fight started, it was when the enemy was determined that the battle truly began. Hypothesizing every attack, deducing every defense, the magicians set up a hand tailored to their opponent.

Adilisia said she had spent a year and a half.

In this fight, what could Honami do against Adilisia's year and a half of preparation? This was the nature of the fight.

YIJYAAAAAAAAAA!

Suddenly, a painful voice reached them from behind.

When Itsuki turned around, he saw the Shax gathered at one point in the ocean.

"--It also seems that they have found the core of this < Night>."

As if boasting of a perfect victory, Adilisia laughed.

Then, something bizarre occurred.

*

On the ground, in a circle of about eight meters in diameter, salt was being lightly scattered.

The lines of that salt were the purificiation of a sanctified place.

Though "kekkai"[5] is a Buddhist term, there was no difference between a spirit barrier in Shintou in this case. It was an expression of the stern, unwavering will of the separation between *here* and *there*.

That was why a <Night>--even if it were a primordial sea, could not enter the inside of the salt. The cylindrical area of air excavated out of the sea somehow had a surreal appearance.

"Nekoyashiki-san?"

Mikan, waving her tamagushi inside the cylinder, raised her voice.

"How are they going to deal with that? What will happen to president onii-chan?"

"No, it might seem like they're in a touchy situation, but I'm getting a spell power analysis report from Genbu-kun right now..."

Nekoyashiki scratched his cheek in a troubled manner.

Sitting in zazen beside Mikan, he held a black cat on his knee.

Genbu-kun was a constantly sleepy, fat cat. Nekoyashiki used four cats in his shikineko, but among them, Byakko was the best at remote tuning while Genbu excelled at spell power analysis.

"Report? Is there something there?"

Mikan opened her large eyes wide.

"Yes, how should I say this... It's not quite clear, but..."

Stroking Genbu-kun's head, Nekoyashiki put on a sour look. Incidentally, he only had his right eye open. In order to keep in tune with Byakko-kun, he kept his left eye shut tight.

"Forget it. If there's something weird hidden in there, my misogi will clear it up. If you keep sulking like that, you'll get washed away by the ocean."

Mikan pointed her lips.

To her, Nekoyashiki made a wry smile--tinged slightly with impatience.

"Sorry... If this analysis is certain... it looks like someone's magic is behind the core of this <Night>. That is to say, it seems like it's because of that magic that the spell wave pollution is corrupted."

Mikan's breath stopped.

After several seconds, the little girl said,

"You mean... this <Night> is happening because of the influence of some other magic...?"

Part 3

The bizarre thing happened at that moment.

The black pigeons that had gathered at a single point--the Shax--evaporated.

They evaporated.

It was a disappearance that could be described with no other word.

"Eh..."

"Wha..."

Honami and Adilisia were at loss for words.

Along with that, odd, rainbow-colored ripples began to expand across the ocean surface, and then even into the air, rushing towards Itsuki and Honami's position.

"No... Has it already happened?"

Suddenly coming to her senses, Adilisia placed her hand on the pentagram of Solomon on her chest.

"Marbas! Glasya・ Bolas! Eligol!"

Receiving her call, the three demons moved.

The evil spirits of blood and war. Befitting of their name, they moved as fast as the reverberation of a thunderclap. In the space of a moment, they stood between Adilisia and the waves and focused their spell power.

They were probably all able to wield monstrous spell power.

However.

That was all a waste.

Even faster than they had moved, the rainbow-colored ripples seized them.

That was all they had to do.

The golden lion, Marbas.

The wolf with the wings of an eagle, Glasya・Bolas.

The silver knight holding the spear and the snake, Eligol.

They all vanished in an instant.

As if they were statues of sand. As if they were water balloons crushed in one's hand. As if they were graffiti being washed away. It wasn't too fast, but rather an indiscreet way of disappearing.

"No way..." Honami whispered.

It wasn't magic.

It couldn't be magic.

If it was magic, then such a ridiculous thing could not have occurred.

"The demons' ether bodies were... disintegrated from the inside out...?"

"Wh, wha, what?"

Unable to grasp the situation, Itsuki clung to the broom.

The white cat in his arms raised a stunned voice.

{Honami-san--we've done a spell power analysis, and I've got a bit of a bad feeling about this...}

"Ye, yeah. President! We're getting out of here!" Honami shouted, running her finger along her broom.

The broom, receiving its order, whizzed upward in a sudden movement, separating away from the ocean surface. To the expanding view of the scenery, Itsuki swallowed his breath.

"--Honami, what's that?"

He pointed.

He pointed to the area where the Shax had evaporated before.

The disintegrated ether bodies were gathering there. Not only that, the ocean <Night> seemed to be narrowing into a funnel there.

"Impossible... are they being devoured?" Honami said breathing roughly, almost gasping for air.

"Even the four demons... no... the whole sea is getting swallowed up... It's eating all the surrounding spell power... incarnating into... a new form..." she said in blank amazement.

Itsuki couldn't pull his eye away from the scene.

No.

It was different.

His *eye* wouldn't pull away from the scene.

From beneath his eye patch, Itsuki's right eye was supporting his body. From inside of it, something was determinedly fixed to the funnel in the ocean.

[LOOK]

Creaaaaaak!

Something grated inside his head.

No, that wasn't the right way to describe it.

His right eye *spoke.*

[LOOK. LOOK. LOOK. THAT... IS TRUE MAGIC.]

"Wh... what?"

He pressed his hand against his eye patch. He dug into his eye with his fingers. It was horrifyingly hot. It throbbed, it felt numb, and it stung.

The view before him reflected in his right eye.

A definite substance bonded him to the spiraling funnel in the ocean.

Devouring the four demons, swallowing the ocean of the <Night>, something with an overwhelming spell power was being born.

Only Itsuki's right eye saw this.

Itsuki's vision focused entirely on that.

[THAT IS... A SEED OF... ♦↑=...]

"..."

{President?}

Suddenly, Byakko-kun called out to him.

{Huh?}

All of a sudden, he had bent over.

If he pulled back at that moment, he could have probably returned himself to an upright position.

However, as he panicked and tried to regain his grip on the broom, he saw a shadow directly below him, normally, with his left eye.

Adilisia was standing completely still in the middle of the ocean.

Standing absentmindedly on Forneus' back, she had a face as though she had finally reunited with a long lost lover.

Her profile was dyed with rainbow-colored ripples.

Consuming the four demons, the ripples stagnated for several moments, and then moved on to pull in the golden-haired girl and the silver chimaera.

"Adilisia-san?"

At that moment, Itsuki lost his balance.

"Ah..."

{President!}

"President!"

Honami threw out her hand. She was too late.

By the time she had realized what was happening, Itsuki had already fallen from the the broom.

Itsuki fell upside-down toward the demonic sea of the <Night> and the rainbow-colored ripples.

Finally,

"... Icchan!"

He felt like someone, somewhere was calling out to him with his old nickname.

And then everything went dark.

Everything except his right eye.

1. ↑ Katatagae (方 *lit: direction changing*) is a custom practiced in the Heian period by Onmyouji which involved divination in order to pick a safe route when traveling.
2. ↑ Ooharai (大 *lit: great purification*) is a form of Shintou purification

3. ↑ The word used for "comet" here is suisei (彗), but another word meaning comet is houkiboshi (). The word for "broom" is "houki."
4. ↑ A silver chimaera (銀 *ginzame*) is a species of shark more widely known in Asia.
5. ↑ Spirit barrier

Chapter 4 - Taboo of the Magician

Part 1

This is what he saw in his right eye.

There was a basement.

Without even a millimeter of deviation, the walls spread in four directions, making a rectangular room.

It was a dark, quaint magician's workshop.

The air was saturated with the ether of mystery, and there were old magic squares drawn all over the floor. Flasks, beakers, and pentagram goblets were arranged on the shelves. In the nooks and crannies of the room, " innocence" was being dispensed so the ether didn't become contaminated by noxious gas. There were also dolls and picture books that had been scribbled inside of.

Entering the workshop were two people.

A brazen, young girl with golden hair, and an old man wearing his black robe as usual.

"Father, what are you going to evoke today?"

"Hey, father, tell me about the magic you used earlier."

She had a lively voice.

The girl happily followed the old man wherever he went. She jumped with surprise at his familiars, and her eyes sparkled at even the most trifling of divinations. She had memorized the old man's techniques in an instant.

The man narrowed his eyes every time. His daughter only became more adorable as she grew older. The old man delighted in her great genius, and instructed her in all of his own secret techniques without regret.

"Addie, when you evoke Shax, you must use the triangle of Solomon. It's because he likes lies. Regarding the symbolism of the triangle..."

"Addie, before that, place the doll and purify it. If you are not pure in mind and spirit, you will contrarily be used by the demon..."

He had a stern, low voice.

However, it was gentle.

The small basement workshop was filled with a simple happiness befitting of magicians.

Until that day.

.....?

Suddenly his vision changed.

It was a night where the moonlight from what was probably a full moon seeped into the mirror-affixed lighting window.

"What's that...?"

The girl tilted her neck.

In the faint light, the old man deformed his hollowed cheeks and made a crude smile.

"It's a seed."

"A seed?"

"It's a seed I've been seeking for a very, very long time."

His eye color was unusual. The girl pretended not to notice, but they were a bleary color, seemingly possessed by something.

In the palm of his wrinkly hand was a tiny, crimson seed.

A pure red... seed?

"A catalyst?"

"Yes, there is a certain magic I want to try. With this, I can finally realize that."

As far as the girl knew, the old man was the greatest magician in the world.

Of course, if there is one type of magic, then there is another that can overcome it, but in the practice of the summoning of Solomon's Seventy-Two Demons, there was surely no one greater than the old man. At the same time, there couldn't be any way for him to improve in the magic arts of Solomon.

Special Magical Ability.

To be good at something is to be lacking in something else. No magic was omnipotent. As long as humans remained human, limits would stand in their way.

However.

Taking a deep breath, the old man made a curt, bizarre statement.

"I--want to become magic."

And time flowed again.

--!

The workshop was stained with the same color as the seed.

Red.

Crimson.

Torn apart, being torn apart, crushed, being crushed, arms, legs, chest, scattered around the workshop.

Blood, and blood, and blood, and blood, and flesh, and blood, and blood, and blood, and bone, and bone and teeth and blood and blood and blood and blood and hair and blood and blood and blood and blood and blood and blood and nails and blood and blood and blood and blood and lips and blood and blood and fingers and blood and blood and blood and blood and intestines and blood and blood and blood and ears and blood and blood and blood--were painted across the four walls of the workshop.

And then.

He saw what tumbled into the bounds of the magic circle.

The old man's freshly severed head.

*Aaaa

There was a sound of dragging.

He felt that he was being pulled along by someone.

The floor seemed to be concrete. He felt pleasantly cool , but slightly in pain. It seemed like he was being pulled along by the collar, his ankles occasionally scraping across the ground.

His vision was still dark. He couldn't move his body at all.

Nevertheless, his right eye reflected a complex picture. The pentagram of Solomon he had learned about from Honami, and a ring in the shape of a bay laurel used for warding off demons both flickered before his eye near his collar.

He understood.

These were Adilisia's fetishes.

Huh? Why can I see those sorts of things?

His thoughts were desultory.

He was dragged a little further.

Apparently they had reached their destination. Adilisia was breathing heavily, even though she didn't seem to have moved a very great distance. She was definitely lacking exercise. Her physical strength was more like a normal girl's.

A soft hand lightly touched his face.

"... Why."

Adilisia's voice sounded like she was crying.

"Why... do even you enter here?"

Her words seemed to be accusing him of something.

He couldn't understand.

But he was glad that he seemed to be alive.

Once again--this time completely--Iba Itsuki lost consciousness.

*

"President! Addie?"

{I, i, it's no use! If you foolishly approach it and those ripples come out again, you'll be going for wool but coming back shorn!}

The white cat, panicking, restrained the witch rushing at the ocean surface.

"I, I know, but..."

Honami extended her white neck and gritted her teeth regretfully.

She stared at the pure white sea.

Yes, it was white now.

After Itsuki and Adilisia were sucked in, the ocean surface froze all of a sudden. The hundred square meter ocean had turned into white frost.

One could feel the cold air across the bridge of the nose to the cheeks, causing the walls of the nostrils to become paralyzed.

It was a change that was difficult to believe, but that was the scene of the reality they now faced.

{I don't know what this means, but I have a feeling it's turning into an excessively large-scale ceremonial magic art. Since it devoured <Goetia>'s demons, they can't have done this...}

Byakko-kun narrowed his eye. The cold air had reached the broom, and it made the white cat shiver, blowing through his long hairs.

{For the time being, let's pull back and regroup. Other <Goetia> members are probably also here, so if we can get to them, we might be able to go over the situation with them.}

"..."

{Er, Honami-san?}

"..."

{Honami onee-chan!}

Mikan's voice came through.

"... I understand. I can't just jump in recklessly."

She stayed quiet for a long time, and then placed her hand on the brim of her pointed hat.

"Since I can't jump in, it'll be alright. ... Rather, if we don't look into this further, we won't be able to get the president back," she said in a low voice, her face hidden by her large hat.

Byakko-kun nodded, and directed Honami away, standing on the end of the broom.

Following him, Honami ran her finger across the broom.

"... I'm sorry, Icchan."

With that, Honami gave a small sigh.

Mikan and Nekoyashiki were waiting in the middle of the frozen ocean.

At the tip of the frozen ocean that gave off the impression of a polar ice cap, a hole of about eight meters in diameter was open. It was the remains of Mikan's spirit barrier. Honami took Mikan and Nekoyashiki out separately on her broom.

First, they got out of the cold--from a thicket on Mt. Nyuu that the <Night> didn't reach, they looked down at the frozen ocean.

"Yeesh, it was cold down there. It's like a refrigerator, isn't it? I thought I was going to freeze to death."

Inside the thicket, Nekoyashiki, wrapped in his four cats, breathed into his hands and rubbed them together.

Honami's eyes glinted at his words.

"He'll be alright in there, right...?' she asked.

"Hmm. It depends on the style of spell, but I don't think the coldness would reach the inside of the ocean."

"Why?"

"To have frozen right as both <Goetia>'s leader and our president fell in, it's like it was carefully aiming and

then froze at that moment, right?" Nekoyashiki answered , pointing at the frozen ocean. "That is to say, can it not be considered that the magician who spread this <Night> was waiting specially for those two?"

"You mean he was expecting president onii-chan to fall in?" Mikan interjected, looking up at Nekoyashiki.

"No, our president probably had nothing to do with it. He was a completely normal person until just recently, after all. --However--and I mentioned this a bit earlier--< Goetia> tried to obstruct us from doing this offer a little too obsessively, didn't they?"

"..."

Honami closed her mouth at Nekoyashiki's words.

She remembered what happened in the park a week earlier.

"Fighting us normally at full power, <Goetia> probably wouldn't lose. That makes the fact that they tried to obstruct us even stranger. For all that, their reason was... because they didn't want this to be seen?"

That wasn't logical reasoning.

If you thought about it even a little, that was common sense. At the end of the day, the question of "What could this be?" didn't lead to a single answer.

"What are you thinking of, Nekoyashiki-san?"

"<Goetia>'s leader wanted to hide this situation. However, before we get to that..."

The sleeves of Nekoyashiki's haori fluttered as if they were dancing.

As he turned around, a single white paper flew out from that sleeve.

It was a seal.

He affixed it to a tree behind the group, and in an instant it exploded from the inside. It was as if the trunk had hollowed out and filled with blasting powder.

"... Do you plan on coming out now?"

"My goodness. That's quite a greeting."

A relaxed voice flowed through the air.

From the other side of the scorched tree, a man gave an exaggerated bow. Seeing his usual unreadable, expressionless face, Mikan clung to Honami's waist.

"... Kagezaki oji-chan."

"It's been about half a day, hasn't it?"

Kagezaki lightly patted his dirtied suit.

His horribly average appearance didn't fit the surroundings.

He was an employee of the <Organization>.

Honami didn't know any more than that. He was in contact with various organizations, and Honami had seen him several times since she was in the institute in England, but she had no idea what kind of magical arts Kagezaki specialized in.

Because he was so average, he contrarily got carried away in his normalcy--you could say that he was an uncanny existence beyond atypicality.

"Were you watching us?" Honami asked, menacing.

In contrast to her, Kagezaki gave a thin smile, handling his words gently.

"Not at all, I have to be here too to assess the 'job.' Moreover... there are rumors floating about that <Goetia > has violated a taboo, so I've come to confirm or deny that."

That simple, carefully aimed word carried a special meaning.

More than Honami or Mikan, Nekoyashiki's conscience was focused on Kagezaki. Perhaps startled by the change, even the cats wrapped around Nekoyashiki turned toward Kagezaki.

"... A taboo, you say?"

"Yes." On his bleach-white face, another surface-only smile floated as Kagezaki slowly continued his words. " Oswald・ lenn Mathers--the original leader of <Goetia> and the father of Adilisia lenn Mathers--is believed to have, during his lifetime, attempted to become magic."

Part 2

Itsuki felt a soft touch on the back of his head.

It was incredibly comforting, and the hand smelled good. He felt as though he wanted to simply vacillate forever like this.

He felt something tickle his throat, and when he opened his eyes, he saw golden hair and a pair of emerald eyes.

"Eh...?"

"Huh...?"

Their eyes were less than a finger's distance apart.

For several moments, the two simply stayed like that, petrified.

"Eek..."

"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!" Itsuki shouted with great vigor. In that moment, he tumbled from his knees, the back of his head slamming hard into concrete.

"Ow!"

Thanks to the pain, he fully regained consciousness.

Seeing the blonde girl sitting in front of him, he blinked his eyes several times repeatedly.

"--A, a, Adilisia-san?"

"... I, if you are that surprised ahead of me, then I will not have any time to be surprised, you know. Is that also one of <Astral>'s negotiation methods?"

"No, that, it wasn't anything like that... what were you. .."

"I just intended to measure your temperature. It would not be strange for there to be some strange residual curse in your body after falling into an ocean tainted to such a degree with spell power, would it?"

"I, I guess you could say that, but..."

Then, he finally noticed his surroundings.

"Ah, that's right. Are you alright, Adilisia-san?"

"I don't know."

Her face turning deep red, Adilisia turned away.

"No, I didn't mean anything weird; are you injured?'

"Huh...?"

The girl frowned, puzzled.

"Say, those tough-looking demons were destroyed, right? Are you going to be okay, Adilisia-san?"

Adilisia gave a small sigh and smiled at Itsuki's words.

"As usual, you know absolutely nothing, do you? Unlike simple demons with ether bodies, mine are flesh and blood. They would not disintegrate from something so simple as spell power interference."

In high spirits, she pointed to the chest of her jet-black dress.

She was the same old Adilisia. It was as if the weak face she made the moment they fell in was a lie.

Itsuki was somehow happy at her behavior.

"So... where are we?" he asked.

He turned his head several times, looking around.

For now, they weren't in the sea of the <Night>. They were in the corner of a room with naked concrete walls. They were in a large space like a parking lot, and there were several sharp-cornered pillars standing. The dust-covered floor was cracked, and there were rusted, suspicious machines scattered about. What little light there was came from a white lamp affixed to the ceiling.

"Is that... by any chance..."

He strangely recognized the area.

He felt that he had seen this on the reference documents before coming here. That is to say, it had appeared from time to time on Furube City's regional TV before.

... Is this... the goblin factory?

It suddenly hit him.

.....

.....

"... Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

In that instant, a scream ran from his fingernails to the top of his head.

"------! Wh, what on earth are you..." Adilisia protested, covering her ears with both hands.

"B, because it's... I didn't think this could be the goblin factory! I, if you think about it, then from those strange stains, they look as though ghosts might come out of them like in the TV programs..."

The girl looked at Itsuki incoherently explaining things with a curious expression.

"You... for someone who was not afraid of my demons, what reason is there for you to be afraid of childish tricks ?"

"I, I guess you could say that, but..."

Repeating the same phrase that he had said earlier, Itsuki then grumbled about how they weren't the same thing.

He was genuinely not above such shame.

He was a loser who took the concept of manliness and slapped it, crushed it, tossed it in the garbage, and finally disposed of it in space.

"Well, I suppose that is like you."

Adilisia lightly shook her head. Her golden curls shook elegantly as she did.

"... Now that I think about it... we're not wet?"

"Somehow."

"But I thought we fell into the sea... There's even air down here, what's the deal?"

"My my. You are unexpectedly direct about the workings of your mind."

As if confirming something, Adilisia clapped her hands together and nodded as she said, "This will do."

"What will?"

"First, see the current situation with your own eyes. It'll be faster than if I explain things, I think."

Standing up, the girl approached the window.

It could be called a window, but it was crude, with a broken shade draped over it. The sash and the glass had disappeared long ago, and a rusted frame and the shade were all that remained of what was once a window.

Adilisia lowered the shade.

"------!"

Itsuki's jaw dropped.

Outside of the window stretched a frozen ocean.

Of course, a tattered factory like this couldn't support so much ice. Plus, even though it was ice, not the slightest bit of cold air could be felt.

"This is... the bottom of that ocean?"

"Yes. The <Night> has not ended yet."

Adilisia, closing her eyes, nodded again.

Itsuki tried to arrange his thoughts.

After getting assigned the 'job' by the <Organization>, we came to erase this <Night>. This meant that we had to fight with <Goetia>, who also took the offer.

However, a sudden, unusual change occurred in the <Night >.

The ripples and the whirlpool emitted from the sea destroyed the demons that Adilisia called out. This interrupted the fight. I then fell with Adilisia-san into the <Night>. Finally, it looks like the sea froze after we fell in.

What happened?

... What a relief, he thought absentmindedly.

To a high school student who could just see ghosts, such things weren't under his control, or rather, he didn't have the strength to do anything anyway. This was only the third magician-like work he had taken on since becoming a president, and it was the first full-blown job of those.

He drooped his head glumly and heaved a sigh.

"What is the matter?" Adilisia asked from beside him.

"Well, it's just... I was thinking if we couldn't escape somehow."

"If that is the case, then you may do as you like. I have something to search for. After going to all the work of entering inside the <Night>, even if I were alone it would be fine."

Instantly sliced in two.

If he impeded her, she would probably abandon him in an instant. Or rather, she seemed like she would be a willing suicide assistant if he were to get in her way.

The girl crouched down over the concrete and scraped something out with a scrap of metal. It looked like a magic circle. Inside the large circle, there were several pentagrams and squares intertwining with one another. And then, as if to enclose those shapes, she bit her pinky finger and wrote out letters in blood.

Itsuki gulped at the act of self-mutilation, but suddenly asked,

"... You're looking for something?"

He tilted his neck.

"..."

Adilisia's finger stopped.

She had a face that bluntly said, "Damn it!"

"You mean it's in this <Night>? So you tried to stop us from taking this offer because you were looking for that? "

"... I, I will tell you, but..." The girl curled her hands into fists and raised her face. "This is a state of emergency , thus it cannot be helped that we are together. I will not give you any more information than is needed."

"Ah, y, yes. Understood!"

Flashed at by Adilisia's emerald eyes, Itsuki immediately bowed.

However, he was a bit late, as Adilisia tapped her magic circle, seeming regretful.

"... It's no use."

"Wh, what's wrong?"

"My fetishes are insufficient. The equipment I have now and this impromptu magic circle are lacking spiritual significance, even though I tried compensating for it with my own blood."

Irritated, she bit the nail of her thumb. Under normal circumstances, they were at a complete loss for anything to do.

A fetish...

"Say, how about this?"

Itsuki unclipped the badge on his collar.

In an instant, the color of astonishment filled Adilisia's eyes.

"L, lend me that, right now!"

The girl leaned forward.

However--in a rare move, Itsuki pulled that badge away from her.

"H, hold on a second."

"What is it?"

"I'm not going to just give this to you for nothing."

"... Are you asking, that I help you to escape? If that is the case then, I will simply take it from you by force."

There was an extraordinary murderous intent lurking in the tone of Adilisia's voice. It was a scale of absolute zero that seemed to freeze Itsuki to his fingertips.

"N, no, just listen! If you have something to search for, then I'm fine with that. If so, I'll even cooperate. In return , what do you say we help each other get out of here?"

Adilisia glared as if evaluating him.

"... You say you will cooperate with me?"

"Yes! It's not unheard of, stuff like this. 'Bitter enemies placed in the same boat give and take?'"

Spouting out a four-character kanji compound[1] that made little sense in the current situation, Itsuki's heart raced wildly. Itsuki was obviously no match for Adilisia

in magic, and he wasn't confident that he could even beat her in a fistfight. As such, his life was on the line in this negotiation.

"..."

Adilisia took a single breath, as if perplexed.

"However, there's still a problem."

"Is it by any chance that you have to keep what you're looking for secret?"

As Itsuki turned toward the water, the girl fell silent. Looks like he hit the mark.

"You know, I'm still a president. If there's a secret you have to keep, I'll never tell anyone. I'll keep it a secret from Nekoyashiki-san, Mikan-chan, even Honami! ... Or is even that not enough?"

"Are you telling me to trust you? Without even forming an official geis between magicians?"

"You were the one who was handling me like a normal person, right? Couldn't you at least trust me that much?"

Finally, somewhat weakly, Itsuki placed his hand on his cheek.

The golden-haired girl lowered her shoulders.

"Are you talking about, equivalent exchange?"

"Ah, wasn't that one of the basics of magic that Honami talked about?"

"Yes, of course it has a simple meaning in transactions, but it also means that what you have and what you do not have are of the same value. In this situation, you are saying that the fact that you are not a magician has the same value as the fact that I am."

"Er, what do you mean?"

Itsuki goggled his eyes at her.

"You are telling me to believe you because you are not a magician, correct? ... That is fine then."

"Huh?" he replied again.

Adilisia's face turned slightly red, and then she turned away.

"I said that I would trust you! So, lend me your badge."

"A, alright."

Adilisia wrenched the badge out of Itsuki's palm, and placed it in the center of the magic circle.

Then,

"With a polished silver pentagram of this caliber, there will be enough spiritual significance. Using the mirror, it can be made into a symbol of amplification as well. -- Hmph, anyhow, it seems like that Honami is your company itself, president."

"Ah, speaking of which, do you know Honami? I was wondering because she called you 'Addie.'"

"We were classmates in an English institute. She was famous for having revived the lost Celtic Magic."

"Is that... something amazing?"

"Originally, there were a large amount of poems and gardols that were only transmitted by mouth and took twenty years to memorize."

"T, twenty years..."

"In the later part of its history, there was the Ogam script, but in the beginning and the middle of Celtic Magic--the druid's method of learning was entirely oral. That girl did fieldwork in England and patched together various oral traditions. Thanks to that, the pile of papers from the report she presented reached the ceiling, but just the face of our teacher at that time was enough of a sight."

"..."

Remembering the desk buried by the contract documents from last week, Itsuki made a glum face.

So she was totally serious when she said, "Why can't you do this much in just a day?"

It's no wonder than that she looked at him so blankly.

He felt that it was harmful to have an overachieving student as a teacher.

"... Shall I begin the ceremony? Using the pentagram, I will evoke a demon with an impromptu ceremony. You might get possessed by the demon if you are too close, so please move away a bit."

"Oh, r, right."

In a flurry, Itsuki retreated back.

Making a surprised face at his appearance, Adilisia spun her words.

"--I do invocate and conjure thee."

Her voice was slow and quiet.

"--I do invocate and conjure thee."

Again, she whispered the same spell, holding the pendant of Solomon on her chest.

"--I do strongly command thee, by Beralanensis, Baldachinensis, Paumachia, and Apologle Sedes: by the most Powerful Princes, Genii, Lichide, and Ministers of the Tartarean Abode: and by the Chief Prince of the Seat of Apologia in the Ninth Legion--"

"..."

Itsuki gulped down a gob of saliva, gazing at the scenery that hid a bizarre feeling of tension.

There was a slight pain in his right eye.

... What was that? he asked himself, holding his eyepatch.

Just before he was about to fade away, a voice sounded in the back of his head. However, even though it seemed like he would normally lose consciousness at times like this, he strangely felt a slight sense of fear.

Slight...?

No. It wasn't slight at all. In that instant, there was a rumbling, and his fear was completely shattered. Instead, the emotion he felt when he heard those words was a rising, uplifting feeling.

I feel like I've always heard that voice before...

His thoughts continued on without him.

That is...

He remembered.

--When he was in kindergarten.

--He was in the <Ghost Mansion> being chased by a monster.

--A hallway covered in dust. A tear-stained kindergarten uniform applique. The one he saw when he fell over

--"Icchan! Icchan! Icchan!"

He heard the crying voice of a girl from far away...

"Follow me!"

"Ah..."

From that one order, he returned to reality.

To the ether body floating in the center of the magic circle directly above the badge, Adilisia was holding out the pentagram of Solomon.

"--Behold the Pentacle of Solomon which I have brought here! Therefore, in the name of the king, thou must follow my order!"

An ether body like white smoke quivered.

Finishing off, the golden-haired witch continued.

"Come forth, Eligol! Firm knight commanding sixty armies!"

"!"

Eligol.

The strongest knight, and the last demon that Adilisia had evoked in the fight above the sea. When Itsuki had seen him, he had mentally prepared himself for defeat like an unbreakable spirit of one who died at war.

But.

--Poof!

Eligol appeared on Adilisia's shoulder.

"Poof?"

Of course, that's not really what it sounded like, but that was the mimetic word that came to Itsuki's mind. However, it was very fitting.

Eligol's armor shone in the light of the white lamp. He had his heroic crimson flag. He had his sharp lance and the green snake wrapped around his arm.

It was the exact same silver knight as before.

... However, he was palm-sized.

"Wh, wha, what is that?"

"P, please do not laugh! It cannot be helped! It took me a year to call out that Eligol from before. Evoking him so suddenly, of course he would only be a shadow of his true form."

"Ah... ha, ha..."

His mouth hanging open, Itsuki nodded.

Special magical ability.

Each magical art had its strengths and weaknesses.

The demons that Adilisia could summon with her Magic of Solomon were extensive, all-purpose, and very powerful, however to call out the true form of those demons required an enormous amount of time and preparation.

When those things were lacking, results like this occurred.

"... gh"

"I, I will tell you beforehand, his nature as a demon has not declined in the slightest despite his size. He will not be any use in battle, but he will be useful enough for now !"

"I, I got it. I won't laugh. Since I won't laugh, please don't let him stab me with that spear."

Running from Eligol, who was poking his spear in Itsuki's direction, Itsuki held his head and made a wish.

*

Meanwhile.

A single crow fluttered down to a point halfway up the mountain, similar to the position of Honami and the others.

It was as dark as night. If it were a genuine bird, it shouldn't have been able to fly.

Stopping the crow in his arm, a black-clothed person made two, three large nods.

"--It seems like our leader has evoked Eligol again," he notified a young man next to him.

They were the magicians of <Goetia> that had accompanied Adilisia. After Adilisia and Itsuki were swallowed by the frozen ocean, they scattered secretly among the mountain.

"Alright, we will stay on standby as long as our leader lives. If, by any chance, there is some kind of disturbance from <Astral>, we will eliminate them individually. --It was outside of our predictions that our leader would be

captured by the <Night>, but we cannot let any word of this situation escape these grounds."

The young man pointed out some directions.

Then, once more, the crow took to the sky.

If a crow could have the intelligence of a magician, it might be surprised.

Several magic circles appeared on the area halfway up the mountain, focusing on the center of the frozen ocean.

That is--using one mountain as a stage, ten individual magic circles intertwined to form one giant, complicated magic circle.

*

"A taboo..."

Nekoyashiki's voice paused.

The normally airy, lighthearted onmyouji's face stiffened like a stone. The hairs of all four cats wrapped around him stood on end.

Mikan, who was shying away, and even Honami, with her cape being held onto by Mikan, swallowed their breath at the gravity of the word.

"No way... seriously?"

"No, it's just a suspicion. I haven't found any evidence. "

Kagezaki shrugged, his appearance as usual as ever. It was a movement like a doll's, as if it were a lie.

"However, so long as you have suspicion, you can launch an investigation. You all know how much of a sin it is for a magician to become magic, correct?"

"..."

A silence fell.

As if taunting the three, Kagezaki continued to speak.

"Spell power is an incredibly easy energy to manipulate. The control of that manipulation is called magic. Depending on the spell power that has leaked out , spell wave pollution can occur. Normally, spell wave pollution doesn't last long, and its scale comes to light. Even a large-scale spell wave pollution, such as this < Night>, will disappear without a trace with the dawn."

Self-purification was at work, even in spell wave pollution.

Just as a river flows into the sea, as an animal's corpse changes into earth, spell power as well sooner or later flowed and then disappeared. That was the truth of nature.

Kagezaki's lips became twisted.

"However, in the case that a magician has become magic, none of this applies. Yes, you could say it's like the difference between fire and nuclear power. A magician that has become magic expels spell wave pollution simply by existing. Furthermore, in this case, the spell wave pollution is not purified by nature. Remaining like in cryogenic stasis, nearby soil and animals--and occasionally humans are 'infected' along

with it. Some different species like mermaids and werewolves are born in such a manner. In modern terms, perhaps you could say it's like radioactive waste?"

With a smile like a noh mask, Kagezaki finally whispered,

"--Of course, in exchange for all that, you can gain power incomparable to that of plain old magic."

The reason that magic was kept away from the public at large was not because it was some huge secret.

It was because it was dangerous.

Otherworldly power lures magicians very easily, and in exchange for that, corrodes reality very easily.

What the <Organization> did was largely for that reason. That is to say, the associations within it watched each other so as to prevent the violation of a taboo. It was a conviction agency for the purpose of restricting and erasing magicians who have violated a taboo.

That's why everyone was afraid of it.

Kagezaki--was a magician who punished magicians.

"I know all that." Going up against Kagezaki's cruel smile, Honami flashed her Ice Blue Eyes. "So what are you telling us to do?"

"No, no, I'm just confirming things. If <Goetia> really has broken a taboo, there is a need to add a fitting penalty from the <Organization>."

His words had a formal sound to them.

Then, a high-pitched voice interrupted the two staring at each other.

"--Ho, Honami onee-chan?"

"What, Mikan?"

"Um, is president onii-chan going to be okay like this? Because if president onii-chan is 'infected' with spell wave pollution--"

"Ah..."

Honami became speechless.

If it was normal spell wave pollution, then anything bad that happened would heal in a number of days.

And then, even if this really was spell wave pollution born of a taboo, a magician could possibly be saved from a worst case scenario.

However, Itsuki was--.

I have to get back to Icchan--

"--?"

Honami, biting her lip, put her hand to the collar of her sailor uniform.

"Honami-san?"

"Right now, the president's badge is--"

For a moment, she felt her badge as if entranced by it, and then suddenly stiffened.

"Nekoyashiki-san, we might not make it in time."

"What do you mean?"

"The president!"

As Honami spoke, she ran off toward the frozen ocean. In a panic, Nekoyashiki and Mikan followed her.

"... Make it in time, huh?"

Kagezaki gazed at the backs of the three with empty, soulless eyes.

1. ↑ Refers to the phrase "goetsudoushuu" (呉 *Bitter enemies in the same boat*) that Itsuki just used

Chapter 5 - Shape of the Magician

Part 1

Time passed.

After having evoked Eligol, Adilisia stood by without moving, talking for a while.

"... What does all this mean? Weren't you supposed to be looking for something?"

"It does not matter what we do. After using magic within the <Night>, it will come to us from the other side sooner or later," Adilisia responded, making the tiny Eligol sit in the palm of her hand.

"From the other side?"

"Yes. This place is like that thing's body. It will notice traces of magic."

"What is this thing you're talking about?"

"You would do best not to ask."

"I told you I'd keep it a secret..."

Itsuki pointed his lips, making a troubled sigh as he did.

"--We have come to retrieve a companion who has violated a taboo," the golden-haired girl said.

"Taboo?"

"Of course, you are unaware of this as well... In the world of magicians, there are several absolute taboos that exist. --One of them is becoming magic."

"That's... I've heard about that from Nekoyashiki-san. What does it mean?"

"It is not so difficult to understand. It is to throw off your meat shell, and become one with the magic that you practice. --It means to unite with the world. In certain religions of the seed, it is also the farthest bounds of enlightenment."

Soon after she was done talking, Itsuki knitted his brows confusedly.

"Wh, what? I didn't even understand half of that..."

"That is because you are an idiot."

Itsuki was sharply rejected.

Furthermore, all of a sudden, Adilisia stopped putting a suffix after his name. Rather than from feelings of endearment, it was quite clear that she was speaking to him as if he were her manservant.

"Uuh... Then, this <Night> is all the work of that magician that committed that taboo?"

"I would not call it his 'work.' Magicians who have become magic spread spell wave pollution simply by existing. That simply causes a phenomenon similar to a <Night> to occur. Thanks to that, we were in a panic when the <Organization> set this up as a 'job'."

That made sense.

Itsuki could finally understand some of what she was saying. Adilisia's "interference" was not just related to the "job."

As soon as he understood, Itsuki suddenly became downcast.

"Then... you're in a tough situation, aren't you Adilisia-san?"

"Hm?"

"Well, since he was your friend. You have to chase after him and find him, that's tough isn't it?"

"That is how it is. --For the time being, I am the leader of <Goetia>. It is only natural that I take responsibility for one of our own who has violated a taboo."

Adilisia proudly puffed out her chest.

Because she's... their leader, Itsuki thought as he listened to her.

He was a president too. Whatever went on, he stood above Honami and the others. Even this "job," for just a moment--and it really only was just a moment--they let him decide whether or not to take it.

If possible, could he give them some kind of reward for that?

Always running away, being forced to come along... could he do something more president-like for a change?

--I can't say that I am right now...

"What is the matter?"

Seeming to worry about Itsuki's silence, Adilisia looked at him.

So, letting go of his inhibitions for a moment, he spoke just what he thought.

"It's just, I think... you're really cool..."

"..."

"What?"

"N, no, pay no heed. I was simply a bit surprised, being told something like that so suddenly... Yes, this body is a crystal of magic cultivated through the ages. It is natural to take the responsibility that accompanies this power. And you, Itsuki, you can see ether bodies, so surely you are no normal human being either...?"

Adilisia made a slight, sulking sniffle with her nose, and then turned her face away as if she had sensed something.

"Huh?"

Itsuki's heart suddenly made a leap.

The girl softly ran her hand across his black leather eye patch.

"Speaking of which, what is this eye patch? Were you injured before?"

"Uh, y, yeah, but it's nothing serious..."

"But you have it on all the time, even at school, correct ? Is there some kind of scar there unfit to show to human eyes?" Adilisia asked him without restraint, looking up at him.

Her delicate chest peering up from her pitch-black dress caused blood to rush to his head, Itsuki turned away.

"No, er, a long time ago, I was chased by a monster in a <Ghost Mansion>. I was told that I shouldn't expose

the injury to light. --Thanks to that, now I can't see anything with it except for monsters and the flow of spell power and stuff like that."

The only time he took his patch off was when he slept.

It didn't bother him to keep it on throughout most of the day, even when showering and washing his face. At first it was a bit of trouble to perceive distance with one eye, but over the course of ten years he had managed to get used to it. Even with the issue of monsters... he only encountered them two or three times per year.

"... I wonder if it gets rough."

When he saw things, he would often faint and lose consciousness and end up in bad situations...

Come to think of it, it seemed pretty natural that he was in the situation he was in now.

"... Itsuki."

Suddenly, Adilisia's hands clamped down on Itsuki's cheeks.

"Fwa! F, f, nrgh, nyuh?"

"Itsuki, even when you have your eye patch on... you can see ether bodies? Furthermore, you can see the flow of spell power itself?"

Her voice was horribly cold.

Just like the time in the park, and when they were facing off on the ocean surface only a few hours before, it was the callous voice of a magician.

"... Feh? H, Hm. But it's not really strange, is it? The eye that I can see ether bodies with isn't exactly normal..."

"That is not the issue here!" the witch roared. "Anyone relying on normal eyeballs can see how far removed the sight ability of a normal eye and the sight ability of a spiritual eye are. What should not be possible is the ability to see such things when the eye is covered. Even if you could temporarily use clairvoyance, to be able to manage both clairvoyance and spirit sight at the same time would be impossible to anyone aside from a very accomplished magician. Such a thing is comparable to looking through a telescope with one eye and looking through a microscope with the other."

"B, but, I can clearly see them both..."

"That is why I am saying it is strange. Itsuki, is seems as though you have not realized it, but that eye cannot be called the eye of a human. If your eye can normally, unconsciously grasp that kind of vision..."

Her fiery speech suddenly cut off.

Adilisia, who had been moving in closer and closer to Itsuki's face, almost yelling at him--suddenly let go of his hand and stood up.

"...?"

"What's wrong?"

"Eligol is--"

Following her words, Itsuki looked at the tiny Eligol perched on Adilisia's shoulder, bravely holding up his flag.

The flag, and the eyes hidden behind his helmet, had become affixed to the other side of the window.

The window?

Felling a chill down his spine, Itsuki turned around.

It was then.

Suddenly--the goblin factory shook hard.

The earthquake-like rumbling, stopping as suddenly as it had begun, gave way to a swelling, thick presence.

"--"

It was a troubling presence that made Itsuki want to vomit.

His teeth began to chatter. Soon, the shivering spread to the rest of his body, sucking the strength from his legs, putting him on his knees while holding onto himself.

And then, the presence spoke.

"I fou・ nd you"

"Hu--?"

"Itsuki!"

At the same time, he heard a rebuke from Adilisia.

"It has arrived!"

Crick!

Seemingly unable to withstand the shocks from earlier, the cracks in the ceiling grew wider.

From those cracks that looked like scars from being slashed by a demon, something viscous slowly fell.

... It was a pitch-black tar.

Mud.

Sludge.

Slime.

It was an acridly pungent liquid that could be called by no other words.

Fwishlip slorshlip

The mud flowing from the ceiling wriggled out, and began to accumulate.

"Wha, what is, that..." Itsuki blurted out in shock.

Plopping out of the cracks in the concrete, the mud began to pile up.

Flurp, shlurp

Blub glub

Little by little, it grew four appendages, raised its head , and took shape.

If that shape had been the one of the dragon appearing in the legend, it would have been wonderful. Itsuki and Adilisa would be saved.

However, it wasn't.

"A person..."

It was a form that was all too human.

[THAT IS MAGIC]

Itsuki's right eye spoke again.

However, paying no attention to it, Itsuki simply let out short breaths.

"You're saying... that's magic...?"

Then, this is... the magician that became magic?

--This kind of thing was?

As they looked on, the shape arranged itself. The mud was continually circulating, however it still managed to bear finger-like protrusions, ear-like protuberances, and an empty hole like a mouth.

As it threw of yellow sludge little by little, it drew nearer.

"・ My dea r Addie"

The mouth moved.

"M・ y precio us Addieeee I've bee n loo king for y ou."

The sound of its voice hurt Itsuki's ears. He felt like his ears were burning up.

"Ret・ uuurn the dem on "

Half-collapsing and restoring at the same time, the mud extended a hand.

"... Ugh!"

At loss for words from sheer disgust, Itsuki landed on his backside as he tried to move away.

On the other hand, the golden-haired girl simply looked down and sighed.

At her words, Itsuki forgot his fear.

"... Oswald... Father..." the girl said quietly.

"If you display any further disgrace, father, then I will destroy you."

Next to frozen ocean--at the corner of the open thicket, Honami was tying mistletoe needles together.

Placing down four twigs with special letters etched into them, she lit a small bonfire in their center. The bonfire lit up her incredibly focused expression as she threw in several stones.

"Honami onee-chan, what are you doing?" Mikan asked as she helped out by sticking mistletoe into the ground.

"Things are gonna get a little high-handed. I'm gonna connect this flame--and the inside of the frozen ocean."

"What do you mean by 'connect?'"

"Earlier, there was a spell power response from the president's badge."

Honami felt her own badge on her collar.

"I think Addie probably evoked something or something like that, and I could feel it in my badge. If that's the case, then it would be really thin, but I think I can get a Pass connected."

"I see. We've got a connection then, I suppose."

Nekoyashiki clapped his hands together in admiration.

More than anything, evocation is an art for the purpose of calling spirits from other worlds. It could be called a technique for connecting with others in far off, separated locations. If that kind of magic was used with a badge the same as Honami's and Nekoyashiki's, then it would be natural in magical theory for there to be a connection to their badges as well.

"That reminds me, there was an anecdote of a Celtic legend where the Druid of the Gods connected two closed spaces. Are you planning to imitate that?"

The black cat Genbu-kun made a "Meow?" along with Nekoyashiki's question.

"Yeah. I've only heard that the legend is from storytellers in Wales long ago. This is the first time I try it ."

Honami looked at the flame, slightly uneasy.

Mistletoe and flame.

It was the same arrangement as the great stone monument, the Druid Circle--more commonly called

Stonehenge. Similar to the magic circles that Adilisia used, these Celtic ritual areas composed of mistletoe and flame made manipulating spell power extremely easy.

"..."

She took a single breath.

She felt her badge.

This was a type of magical technique almost completely forgotten by Celtic magic itself. Not to mention, space connection was not used in any other art.

"--Well, here goes," Honami spoke clearly.

Part 2

It was as if the air in the factory had all been replaced with concentrated sulfuric acid.

Itsuki's throat stung. He felt horribly dizzy. His world became distorted, as it was progressively polluted by an alternate world located in the heart of the mud.

It was as if he were in Hell.

--Magicians who have committed a taboo emit spell wave pollution.

Itsuki understood the meaning of that for the first time , in his skin.

This was unmistakably a taboo.

A lump of sin.

Something that, at any cost, should not exist in this world.

However.

"Fa... ther...?"

That simple word made Itsuki confused.

"..."

Adilisia didn't respond.

She simply stood facing the writhing mud--and slowly began to speak.

"Father, if I may speak, I will say it only once more. If you disgrace us any further, I will destroy you."

She made a declaration to the mud that took the shape of a person. It was difficult enough for her to stay staring straight ahead.

"Dis・grace" the mud uttered.

It began to shake its body.

At that moment, a part of the mud took on a different shape.

It jumped out with a flapping sound--it was the flock of black pigeons they had seen only hours before!

"--Shax?!"

Pecking at the concrete, stabbing through broken machines, the place where Adilisia had stood was now buried in black pigeons.

The girl had tumbled over just barely in time.

As she stood up, the black pigeons returned to the mud, leaving the floor where Adilisia stood in a state

warped from its original form. There only remained a large, round hole like a crater.

Furthermore, that was not the end.

At the same time, the mud, taking on another shape, flew toward Itsuki.

"Marbas?!"

The golden demon lion--though it was now covered in mud.

The strength in its legs was unmistakably that of a beast's.

Closing the distance between the two in an instant, the jaw that would devour Itsuki flew open.

"--!"

Ah.

It died.

The moment Itsuki realized it died, he was unable to move a muscle, and his face was wrapped in the demon's

raw breath. Its white fangs were brushing toward his neck.

"GISYAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

What arose was the scream of the beast.

Marbas's eyeball exploded.

The ether body's black blood splashed across Itsuki's head. Itsuki, staring dumbfounded straight ahead, had his neck pulled by someone.

"Itsuki! Hold on!"

Within Itsuki's sight as he was pulled by Adilisia, Marbas turned back into mud. Eligol, the one who had stabbed Marbas's eyeball, made a huge leap, landing on Adilisia's shoulder.

"Ah... haah... ha..."

Itsuki breath was rough and broken.

He felt like the oxygen in his body was being used up all at once. No matter how many times he sucked in air, his breathing didn't get any easier.

"Adilisia... san..." he finally managed to whisper. " Don't tell me... that each one... of those mud piles... is a demon..."

"That is how it would appear to be," Adilisia responded in an emotionless voice.

"It was father's loss... to have become magic. Secretly gathering disciples, attempting to merge with the seventy two demons, but failing to completely do so... now all that remains of him is mud reflecting his desire and instinct. Of the seventy two demons, he managed to combine with sixty five of them, his body now an impossible lump of ether.

"..."

Itsuki remembered the workshop he had seen in his right eye.

The sea of blood staining the floor. The scattered chunks of flesh. The severed head that had tumbled into the magic circle.

That time, Adilisia's father had died.

Even if he had attempted to violate a taboo, it was so--

--so, bitter.

"Ah..."

His stupidity finally eluding him, he realized there for the first time.

"Adilisia-san, there's nothing you can..."

If Oswald was drawing from the same seventy two demons as Adilisia, then victory or defeat would depend on the number and quality of each combatant's demons. However, Adilisia's strongest demons had already been consumed in the process of reaching her current position. There was no way she could put up a fight with just her tiny Eligol...

"There is, something."

Adilisia gave the slightest, most faint smile.

"After all, I came here to destroy my father."

"A· ddie"

Oswald, the mud, quivered again.

What would he release next? Glasya・Bolas? Botis? Or perhaps, some new demon that Itsuki was unaware of ?

With speed like a bullet, three black pillars of shadow began to extend.

However, faster than that,

Adilisia held up her pendant of Solomon.

"--Recede!"

*

"--It's here!" one of the black clothes from <Goetia> shouted from the mountainside.

"Begin the ceremony!"

At the same time, spell power began to flow through all of the magic circles surrounding the frozen ocean.

In an instant, a giant, intertwining magic circle gained significance.

*

"Hoho, interesting, combining magic circles into one large one..." Kagezaki sighed expressionlessly, still standing halfway up the mountain. Taken at face value, his words might seem like a complement, however his voice was completely devoid of emotion.

"So this is the secret technique of <Goetia>?"

*

The three shadows dashed towards Adilisia.

One was a wolf that breathed fire.

Another was a giant leopard.

And the last, was a winged bull.

The three monsters suddenly engulfed the powerless girl, moving in to devour her.

--They ended in an instant.

"Recede!"

With that single word, the three demons disappeared without a trace. They weren't even able to return to the mud this time.

Adilisia simply held up the pentagram of Solomon.

"Adilisia-san..."

"If something can be evoked, it can recede as well. That is simple logical reasoning."

The girl gave another smile to the dumbfounded Itsuki .

"Of course, you need more spell power than what your opponent has. If you add me and the other twenty < Goetia> magicians together--naturally we are more than a match for my father."

This was the true form of the magic circles lined up outside.

They had stood by, creating several magic circles of recession, all for this moment.

"· Addie!"

Oswald was deranged with agony.

"The truth is, after we had disposed of <Astral>, we were planning to take care of this. This is one of the secret techniques of <Goetia>. --However, it could not be helped that our plans underwent a bit of revision."

Adilisia seemed more upset than beaming with the pride of victory.

"Recede!" she shouted, gripping the pentagram of Solomon.

A blast of spell power was launched at the mud.

"--Recede! Recede! Recede!"

She performed the opposite action of evocation.

The opposite of evocation--recession.

The demons composing Oswald's shape were one by one sent back to their parallel world. The mud began to shed and shrivel up, finally disappearing.

The mud appeared to be growing smaller.

It was as if it were being burned away by a flame.

The mud, which had been a size larger than Itsuki in the beginning, was now about the size of a child, proceeding on to be squished to the size of a cat or puppy--and then disappearing several seconds after that.

It was too short of a last moment.

"Haah..."

"Haha," Itsuki laughed with a dry voice.

He felt like an idiot for worrying.

From the beginning, Adilisia was the one who held the upper hand. It was fitting for her to be the most valued item in the Magical Company know as <Goetia>.

"My my, what is the matter? Itsuki."

Turning around, Adilisia laughed mischievously.

"Oh, Adilisia-san--"

"I told you. I told you to pull out of this offer, because we would have been enough to handle this. If <Astral> had not gotten in the way, this would have been much easier."

Grabbing the hem of her dress, the golden-haired girl curtsied.

"However, I will thank you, just a little bit, for grieving over a father like mine."

"..."

Unable to say anything, Itsuki touched his cheek.

It was then--

A voice resounded in the darkness.

"--I・ do invocate and conjure thee"

"Huh?"

They turned around.

Before their eyes, the voice continued.

"--I・ do invocate and conjure thee"

"--I do strongly command thee, by Beralanensis, Baldachiensis, Paumachia, and Apologle Sedes: by the most Powerful Princes, Genii, Lichide, and Ministers of the Tartarean Abode: and by the Chief Prince of the Seat of Apologia in the Ninth Legion--"

Suddenly, the remains of the mud lurking in the concrete took shape--

"Adilisia, behind you!"

"Wha...!"

The girl twisted her back.

However, there was no way she could have made it in time.

This time, she had no space in which to make the recession spell, and a wolf with the wings of an eagle--a mud-covered Glasya･ Bolas slammed into her back from behind.

"My d･ ear Addiethat was disappointing"

Expelling a broken voice, the mud that should have disappeared rose once again.

It took the shape of a person--of a half-collapsed old man.

"If you･ can evoke you can send it back. The same goes for the opposite. If even the slightest amount remains, you canevoke it again."

"..."

Pain and surprise hovered on Adilisia's face.

--She had made a mistake.

Itsuki and Adilisia hadn't thought that the mud was intelligent. They had thought that it was like a rampaging beast that had shed any remnants of human sense and knowledge.

They were wrong.

It could remember all of its secret techniques and magic from when it was a magician.

And then, it had waited for the moment when the girl would show an oversight.

It could be called, cunning, perhaps.

"Now then・ allow me toeat your demons"

The mud--the mud in the shape of Oswald, inched slowly toward Adilisia.

It didn't even enter Itsuki's eyesight.

There was nothing a boy like him, who could only see it, and was not a magician himself, could do.

Right now, that was correct.

Magic wasn't a mystery that could transcend rational boundaries. It was simply a system based on a hierarchy of survival of the fittest that was affiliated with the spirit world.

Sludge dripped from the finger of the old man.

Just before that sludge could drip into the lips of the girl who had been knocked over by the wolf--

--It was pulled back.

"Yo・u?"

Oswald's voice bore a question for the first time.

Itsuki's hand was holding onto the old man's wrist.

"... W... wa, wai... wa... wait..."

He couldn't form words.

It was as if the roots of his teeth couldn't arrange properly.

He felt as though he would throw up simply from the bizarre sensation he felt from holding onto the wrist.

Even so, he didn't let go.

"Wha・t areyou"

With a creak, the old man's head twisted at an impossible angle. His eyeball-like protrusions sluggishly turned toward Itsuki.

"**--!**"

As he was gazed at, Itsuki's muscles began to cramp. He felt as though he were being bound.

As though the old man had an evil eye.

Throwing off Itsuki's stiff hand, the old man extended his finger toward Itsuki's face.

"Tha・t eye" the mud's throat squirmed.

"Tha・t eye isinteresting"

Sludge dripped onto his eye patch, causing a white smoke to billow up.

"Hyi...gh"

He couldn't move.

Behind his eye patch, he could feel the sensation of the collapsing finger stroking the surface of his eyeball. A disgusting sensation erupted from his eye.

And then,

Shwing--

Suddenly, the finger of the mud, coming into contact with his badge, melted away.

"--!"

The badge on Itsuki's collar was hot like a frying pan.

"Wh・at"

The old man flew backward.

His body quivered again.

Another small arrow sliced into his twisted back.

Mistletoe spear.

And then, in the magic circle that Adilisia had carved, a new figure appeared.

"Ho, Honami!"

"President--sorry for making you wait."

A girl with chestnut-colored hair was smiling.

In the process of connecting space with the flames and magic circle, her cape and part of her pointed hat had burned off, but perhaps that added to her charm.

All of a sudden, the wolf that had knocked Adilisia over--Glasya・Bolas--also turned to mud and disappeared. Itsuki and Adilisia stood up with one another.

"... I was seen in a disagreeable position."

Adilisia gave a small sigh. Her dress had been torn in several places as she had fallen, but thankfully she had no serious injuries.

"I got what you were generally trying to do. With those combined magic circles earlier, you were going to stop him, right? Whatever the case, shouldn't you rest?"

"--Hmph, it was not enough."

Adilisia was definitely gritting her teeth.

The two glared at the old man made of mud.

"..."

However,

"We wi･ ll meet againin the next <Night>"

The mud suddenly melted.

From its face and its shoulders and its arms and its legs, it lost its order and spread out on the floor in puddle of viscous liquid.

Flowing just like that into the cracks in the concrete, the slushing, gushing liquid disappeared.

"It... disappeared?"

Itsuki rubbed his eye, disbelieving.

And after all the trouble he had gone through in preparing himself for an inescapable battle.

"President... are you alright?"

Honami ran up to his side.

"... Ah... yeah," he replied, suddenly bending down.

"President!?"

"Ah... no, my back's just fallen out."

He let out a tired laugh. He felt as though this night had lasted many months. The last minute especially had a weight that felt like many years.

"... Man... even though I thought things were going just a bit well..."

Honami let out a sigh.

Itsuki wanted to tell her that there's no way he could get used to this, but he felt a though he couldn't move his lips properly.

Ah, this is no good.

"Honami--I think I'm gonna faint, so I'll say this now--"

"H, huh? What?"

"Yeah. That muddy old guy just now--keep it a secret," he said to Honami, who was in a rare state of worry.

"Secret?"

"Yeah... I promised Adilisia-san. Tell Mikan-chan and Nekoyashiki-san... too."

"Itsuki..."

Adilisia held her chest.

"... Then I'll leave... the rest to you. Right now... I'm tired."

"W, wait, president!"

He slumped over toward Honami. It was indiscrete, but it felt kind of nice.

Finally, the scene outside of the window with the rusty sash was visible.

--Ah, that's right.

He finally understood the reason why the monster disappeared.

From the broken window, gentle rays of sunlight extended into the room.

The frozen ocean had completely disappeared, and only the usual scene of the mountain--and of the goblin factory, remained on the grounds.

"President onii-chan!"

He felt as though he could hear Mikan's energetic voice...

Chapter 6 - End of the Magician

Part 1

"Well, at least you're safe, right?" Nekoyashiki said in a tired voice.

As he did, he raised Itsuki's arms above his bare upper half.

"Owowowow... Don't move them... Ack!"

His bent arms raised a screech. The bruise he had received when he had fallen into the ocean of the <Night > was still causing him pain. In addition, several sutras had been scrawled across his arms and legs. His face hurt and tickled, and he was preoccupied with churning it into multiple expressions.

That is to say, right now, Itsuki's entire body excluding his ears was covered in scripture.

"--Please bear it for now. Since you were in such thick spell wave pollution, we at least need to inspect you and lay out protection."

"But... don't monks normally do this sort of thing?"

"Ah, you probably think that because of societal stereotypes. Onmyoudou is good with dealing with curses and such, but it isn't meant for contamination like this. Mikan-san is also not equipped to deal with a situation as specific as this. Though if this were long ago, and we had Sekiren-san with us, this would have been no problem."

"Meaow."

The black cat on Nekoyashiki's shoulder--Genbu-kun--gave a yawn of agreement.

They were in the <Astral> office's nap room. Itsuki sat up on the white bed in the corner of the room.

It was past three in the afternoon.

It had already been two hours since Itsuki had awoken from his coma. After they hauled Itsuki to the office, it seemed that they had gathered up the completely exhausted <Goetia> magicians.

"I guess it's to be expected. Since long ago, summoning magic has been known to require much rougher exertion

of the body than other types of magic. Especially if the evocation fails, a boomerang effect occurs, sapping many times the usual amount of vitality from the body. I suppose it's a best case scenario, since none of them died, " Nekoyashiki expounded.

It seemed like all the magicians aside from Adilisia had their energy totally consumed after the intertwining magic circle had been destroyed. It seemed that some of them had already collapsed before when Honami defeated the Shax, but Itsuki figured that they deserved it .

"Hmph. In any case, it doesn't seem like any symptoms are occurring due to the spell wave pollution. Your spiritual resistance must be higher than I thought, president," Nekoyashiki lauded after putting the finishing touches on the sutras across Itsuki's body.

"Hah, I guess that's a relief."

"It seems that way for the time being, at least. There are times when spell wave pollution associated with a taboo erupts after a while."

"W, what happens then...?"

Nekoyashiki made a meek expression, and stroked Genbu-kun on the head.

"... Are you sure you want to hear about it?"

"Hu, huuh?"

Letting out a sigh, the young man shrugged the shoulders of his haori.

"For example... after several months' time, your eyes will grow farther apart, your hands will become webbed, and you'll start yearning for the sea..."

"Th, then, almost becoming a monster..."

"Aside from that... you could turn into a corpse and forever be enamored with loitering around mansions... you could turn into an insect with the rising sun..."

"--*gulp*"

Itsuki's cheeks became stiff.

Just as his scripture-covered face was about to turn from blue to white,

"I'm just messing with you."

"N, n, n, Nekoyashiki-san?"

"Perhaps I overdid it a bit. Ahaha. In any case, the truth is that I don't know for sure what will happen if the spell wave pollution remains in your body, but I don't see anything unusual, so I think you're all right."

"--If that's the case, please say so from the beginning," Itsuki said, almost in tears.

At that point, the sound of the door at the entrance opening could be heard.

"I'm heeeere!"

Spreading out the sleeves of her miko outfit, Mikan looked like an airplane as she ran inside.

Running straight into the nap room, she looked at Itsuki's face, and blinking her large eyes, fell into a fit of laughter.

"Aah, president onii-chan's face looks funny~"

"D, don't laugh!"

"What's the matter?"

Honami, who had just entered the room, blushed as she saw Itsuki's upper half--and then put her hand over her mouth to hold in her laughter as she saw his face.

"E, even you, Honami?"

"I know, I know, but your letter-covered face is just... ahahahahah!"

As she held her sides, tears began to form in her Ice Blue Eyes.

Itsuki held back his complaints, not wanting to interrupt Honami's rare smile. It was then that a third person entered from outside.

"My my, you have quite a keen sense of fashion."

The newcomer, Adilisia, blushed as she let out a chuckle.

"Hah..."

Somehow, she still seemed desperate. Itsuki hastily threw on a shirt. He wished he had some face washing cream with him.

When he got up from the bed,

"Er, were there any issues with the spell wave pollution?" Adilisia asked.

"No, I'm fine. How about you, Adilisia-san?"

"I told you before. I was a magician the moment I was born. I have not slacked in my training to repel the effects of the spell power of others."

"... Well I'm just a normal person," he pouted, pointing his lips.

Actually, since his father was a magician, he might be just the same as Adilisia, just with a hundred times less experience.

As he splashed his face with water, a knock came from the entrance door.

"Is it a customer?"

Wiping his face with a towel, he left the washroom.

Honami had already opened the door.

And then, the atmosphere became stiff.

"Well, it seems the two leaders are here, so would it be alright to allow me to perform a confirmation of progress right here?"

A person from the <Organization>--Kagezaki--stood still before them with a vacant smile.

Several minutes later.

In the reception room, which was just a desk, with the rest of the room separated by a partition wall, everyone had gathered.

Kagezaki of the <Organization>, Adilisia of <Goetia>, Nekoyashiki, Honami, and Mikan of <Astral>--and Itsuki.

In the middle of the desk, Kagezaki set out a thick stack of documents, and continued speaking.

"For these reasons, the <Organization> has recognized the <Night> from yesterday as having risen from second to third class spell wave pollution. Since it appears that neither of the groups that were tasked with destroying its core have succeeded, it seems the <Night> will occur again in a nearby area. During that time, the 'job' contract will continue to be valid."

His voice seemed to not hold any sort of emotion.

Itsuki made a frown.

"Again... You're saying something like that <Night> is going to happen again?" he moaned.

"Yes, that is of course, if we are talking about a normal <Night>."

Kagezaki looked toward Adilisia questioningly.

Itsuki's shoulders quivered.

However, not one muscle in Adilisia's face budged.

"Is there something you want from me?" she asked with a blooming smile. It was an artful grin, as if begging to be framed and hung on a wall. Though, even if it was pretty, it made Itsuki's stomach hurt.

"No, there is just something I would like to confirm with <Goetia>."

"What may that be? I do not mind if we speak here," Adilisia prompted, crossing her slender fingers together.

"If that is the case, then I will not hesitate," Kagezaki said, then continued, "There are rumors that a magician of <Goetia> has secretly broken a taboo."

Yikes! Itsuki yelped inside his mind.

Adilisia's smile did not falter.

"Unbelievable. A taboo is something absolute. It does not seem befitting of the <Organization> to lend their ears to such playground hearsay, does it?"

"Those are strong words. Well then, please allow your attention to fall to these reference documents."

Kagezaki, making a nod, brought out a new stack of papers. There were several sheets and photos in it, including some satellite photos.

Itsuki scowled.

"What is this photo...?"

"It is an aura-reflecting Kirlian photo. In the < Organization>, Kirlian photography is also used to specify ley lines."

Kirlian photography--a type of photography used for the purpose of detecting life signs, employed in many magical groups as a technique for capturing images of spell power. However, the only magical association with the scale and idea to take Kirlian satellite photos was the <Organization>.

"As you know, a <Night> is a storm of spell power that flows ley lines. If you investigate the flow of these ley lines, you can predict when and where the <Night> will emit spell wave pollution. That is why we are able to conduct these offers." Kagezaki continued his explanation. "The spell power that this <Night> originated from has been traced across mountains and seafloors, leading us all the way to ley lines far off in

Europe. If you follow the source, the lines go to England, near Wales, four months ago. A workshop of <Goetia> should be located on these ley lines."

"Wha..."

As opposed to the panicking Itsuki, Adilisia elegantly waved her hand.

"It is natural that our workshop would be constructed on ley lines. That does not amount to any sort of evidence."

"Haha, indeed," Kagezaki nodded, as if agreeing with her.

Phew...

Itsuki ran his hand across his chest in relief.

However, he had been too soon.

"Looking further inward--four months ago in Wales, the day that the <Night> first appeared, the representative leader of <Goetia> and his trusted adeptus minor both died unnaturally in their workshop. Do you have anything to say about that?"

"!"

Adilisia sank into silence.

She wasn't using her right to remain silent. It was the sort of silence in which one wondered how someone was aware of something.

"Yes, you managed to cover that one up fairly well. -- Do not worry, I'm not accusing you of anything. After all, magicians dying unnatural deaths during ceremonies isn't the kind of thing you want to have in a newspaper. However, to have written the deaths off as the result of a mere heart attack and stroke in your report to the organization makes me a bit wary about your intentions."

"That is..."

"Do you have some sort of excuse?"

His words seemed accusatory, but the color of blame wasn't the least bit present in his voice.

It simply seemed like he was trying to uncover the facts.

"--Well, the reason that you became the leader of < Goetia> was because of this incident, wasn't it? You also quit the academy which Honami-san here was attending as well."

His words had a terrifyingly slow, characteristic rhythm to them.

It almost sounded as if he were using hypnosis.

Adilisia-san...?

Itsuki looked at her from the side. The leader of < Goetia> kept her head down.

"U, um, is it okay if I ask a question?"

"What is it?" Kagezaki implored.

"I, if something like that were to have happened, why would the magician have traveled to Japan along with the <Night>?"

As Itsuki finished his question, Kagezaki leaned back in his chair, as if to say "Oh, is that what you're wondering about?"

"Just as an example... Like if a magician were to have committed a taboo? If they were to have turned into magic and melted into the ley lines?" Kagezaki traced a river in the air with his finger. "There are several kinds of taboos to be broken, but the easiest to understand, and the most troublesome method would be that. One literally changes his self into magic. This is nothing but an example, but--if we are talking about summoning magic, the user's body would end up shifting between the demons themselves as they were summoned."

Itsuki's chest froze.

The old man that had turned to mud.

A lump of several demons that was once a magician.

If a monster like that were to exist, it would be able to melt into the ley lines and eventually become the storm of spell power called a <Night>.

Wouldn't it?

"..."

Looking at Itsuki, who was at a loss for words, Kagezaki shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, as it is now, this would not suffice as evidence."

"Huh...?"

Kagezaki made a light, wry smile.

"That is why I came to make sure of things."

"Then, why are you..."

Kagezaki shot a look at Adilisia in response to what Itsuki was about to ask.

And then he sighed.

"Because if the only one hiding the taboo is the leader, then all guilt would fall upon them."

In an instant, the color of Itsuki's face changed.

After that sentence, he understood what Kagezaki wanted to say.

"However, if all of <Goetia> knew about this, then everyone involved would receive punishment."

... That would be too much.

That is, Kagezaki was telling Adilisia to become a scapegoat.

If she alone were accused, then they would turn a blind eye to the other members of <Goetia>.

"..."

Adilisia bit her red lip. She was probably searching for some way to respond.

But it was no use.

She was trapped.

Even Itsuki knew that.

"--I am the temporary leader of <Goetia>. The responsibility for any taboos committed would naturally fall on me."

"... Yes, this body of mine is a crystal of magic fostered through the ages. It is natural to take the responsibility that accompanies this power."

That was the kind of person she was.

Different from Itsuki.

She wasn't simply a figurehead, she was a truly cool person who knew what it meant to stand above others.

"Well then, how shall we handle this?"

Kagezaki slowly drew closer. His words seemed ready to lunge in for the kill.

"If you give us your confirmation, the I will have people dispatched directly from the <Organization>. Tell me the name of the magician who committed the taboo, and I assure you we will not let him escape our might."

Unconcerned, he laid out the facts.

"..."

Adilisia opened her lips.

"I..."

"... know nothing!"

Those words were not Adilisia's.

Kagezaki turned to their source.

"President Iba?"

"I... Itsuki, what are you?"

"I'm saying... I don't know of anything like that. I was underneath the ocean of the <Night> with her, and I didn't see any magician like what you were talking about . That's why Adilisia has nothing to hide."

Itsuki curled up his fists tightly, strongly, trying to push away fear, but still strong.

He endured, staring straight into Kagezaki's gaze.

"--My goodness." Kagezaki let out a breath of surprise. "I see. If the president of <Astral> says as such, I have no choice but to respect it. Well then, let us put an end to this discussion. --However, I have heard that almost all of <Goetia>'s magicians are debilitated for the moment. Do you think you can carry out the offer like this?"

He threw off the direction of the conversation. After all the work he had done prying into <Goetia>'s matters, it seemed his intention was to pry, and nothing more.

"That is..."

"If you need magicians, we're all right here."

This time, a dignified voice rose up from behind Itsuki.

"Honami?"

Combing her short chestnut-colored hair out of the way, Honami narrowed her eyes.

It was a matter-of-fact motion.

"President, did you forget? <Astral> is a company that rents out magicians. There's no reason we can't do business with our competition, though. It might even be a good thing pro forma, seeing as to how we're doing the same offer as <Goetia>."

"Uh... y, yeah!"

"Honami..."

Adilisia, taken aback, looked at Itsuki, then Honami. She had an expression as if she had suddenly turned back into a child.

"It's our job. We've got some stuff between us, but let's ignore it. How about it? Wanna contract with us, Addie?"

Honami gave her a light wink.

Adilisia turned red.

"... I, I do not mind forming a contract with you," she said in a subdued tone.

"Alright then, contract settled. Got any complaints, Kagezaki-san?"

Honami, who had stood up, pushed her thin-rimmed glasses up.

"... No, I have none."

Shaking his head, Kagezaki returned his disarrayed documents to his attache case.

He then bowed and gave an empty smile that left frighteningly little of an impression.

"Well then, this concludes my investigation. Thank you, and to greater magic."

After the suited figure left the office, Itsuki had fallen back into his chair when Mikan ran into him, bumping their heads together.

"Gwah!"

"President onii-chan, you were amazing! You made Kagezaki oji-san go away!"

Mikan jumped up and down with an excited face.

Behind her, Nekoyashiki, covered head to toe in cats, held his cheek with his hand.

"Mm, you picked quite a fight, president."

"H... huh? I didn't mean to--"

"No, since you jumped in after Kagezaki-san had pushed Adilisia-san so far, you ended up ruining him quite brilliantly. That's the first time I've ever seen Kagezaki-san so angry, you know."

"He, he was mad?"

Itsuki had never been able to read his facial expressions.

"Yes, and quite."

Nekoyashiki nodded with a smile.

From their positions on his knee and shoulder, Byakko-kun and Genbu-kun each gave a "mee-ow" in agreement.

Somehow, Itsuki felt as though he was a patient who had just been just diagnosed with a fatal disease.

"--Well then, you managed to ride the mood this far. What now, president?"

Honami looked at him with delicately cold eyes.

"What do you mean?--We're going to capture the magician in that <Night>, right?"

"But if we don't have the support of the <Organization > it'll be difficult to pinpoint where the <Night> will show up next. At best we would only be able to narrow it down to a few options."

"Oh..."

Darn it. He hadn't thought of that at all.

Honami let out another small sigh, putting her hand on her waist. Rather than angry, she seemed more tired.

Even though it was another thing that Itsuki had overlooked, it seemed to make her just a little bit happy, too.

"Iccha--I mean, president..."

"You know, something like that is quite simple."

Adilisia interjected from the side.

"Huh?"

She focused her gaze.

This far in the game, the golden-haired girl was not about to hesitate, and instead she placed her hand across her chest.

"Use me as bait."

Part 2

Evening came.

As Nekoyashiki and Adilisia busied themselves with counting out figures on an abacus, Itsuki went out onto the office's messy balcony. Decorative plants were scattered about in a disorderly fashion, giving the place a feeling similar to a jungle.

Incidentally, it seemed that the battle between Nekoyashiki and Adilisia was quite fierce.

"This is the set price we charge for each magician involved."

"That is outrageous! The differences in ability between magicians are not generally taken into consideration. At most, *this much* would be appropriate," Adilisia said to

Nekoyashiki, who was clicking away the spheres on the abacus.

With a clack, Adilisia stuck her finger between the spheres. Nekoyashiki hadn't thought that Adilisia could read an abacus.

"Th, then, three parts, one less than before!"

Clack!

"That is barely any change at all! No matter how much we compromise, I will only pay this much."

Clack! Clack!

"You aren't even compromising anything! Do you realize how much value my cat skills hold? And how much it costs to import Honami-san's mistletoe?"

Clack! Clack! Clack!

"If you are a magician, then economizing magical items is your own problem! I charge for nothing more than what I bring into battle!"

Clack! Clack! Clack! Clack!

Each of their fingers moved so quickly across the abacus that they left afterimages.

"... W, wha--"

Just looking at them made Itsuki's stomach go sour, so he had left them to be on his own.

"What's wrong, president?"

When he turned around, Honami was there.

As Honami came out into the cool evening air, she had her staff with her, and her neck was tilted gently to the side.

"Er, I'm just taking a break."

"All you do is take breaks."

Tossing a sharp word at Itsuki, Honami sat down on the handrail of the balcony.

Her whole back was washed in the light of the evening sun. Her white skin and pointed hat looked all the more pretty in the red light.

"But still... good work," Honami said with a smile.

"Ah... yeah."

At the unexpected words, Itsuki rubbed the head of his nose.

"And, by the way... sorry."

"Huh?"

"I thought that the offer was just for a regular <Night>. I didn't think things would get that bad. Sorry, president. "

Closing the space between her knees, Honami pulled down the rim of her pointed hat with her hand. Her face couldn't be seen.

Itsuki waved both of his hands back and forth.

"Ah, it's fine, its fine! Everything ended alright in the end."

"Then that's good. Thanks, president."

"Y, yeah."

Perhaps it was a fault that she was always angry at him, but Honami seemed bizarrely shy. He could sense his cheeks warming up.

Suddenly, he felt as though he should ask something.

"... Come to think of it, why did you come to <Astral>?
"

"Why do you ask?" Honami replied in a gentle voice.

"Adilisia said you were an amazing genius. She said you were invited by many other magical groups. --No matter how you think of it, we're a small business, right?"

"We're?"

"Hm?"

Honami raised her staff and pointed at him.

"You said 'we're.' So you've finally noticed that you're our president?"

"D, don't make fun of me!"

Honami smiled at Itsuki's reaction.

She let out a sigh.

"... It's because you were here, Icchan."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Jumping down from the handrail, Honami extended her finger.

She touched Itsuki's eye patch.

"Does it still hurt?"

"Huh? No, it doesn't usually anyway."

Wait, what? I don't think I ever told her about my eye hurting...

As Itsuki thought, Honami ran her finger across the leather.

"President--Itsuki, you don't remember when you got your eye patch, do you?"

"Right, but it seems like some kind of bad stuff went down."

He had only fragments of memories remaining from the time he ran out of the <Ghost Mansion> in tears. It shouldn't be impossible to remember since it was when he was little, but about a half year before and after the incident, his memories were vague for some reason. One thing he remembered for sure was that he was in a hospital for a long time.

And then, there was another figure that appeared there.

"Itsuki! This man is overcharging me!"

In a huff, Adilisia pointed her lips. Such a face was so like her, and it made Itsuki, and even Honami, erupt with laughter.

"W, what is it?!"

"N, no, it's nothing. I was just thinking, Adilisia-san, that way of doing things fits you."

"I do not think that is something I should take as a compliment," Adilisia answered, pouting.

"--President, we've decided on the contract conditions, so please stamp here," Nekoyashiki called out from the office.

"Ah, coming," Itsuki responded, hurrying over.

"..."

Looking at his back, Adilisia frowned in a troubled manner.

She turned to her side to face Honami.

"... May I ask you something?"

"What?"

"That eye of his..."

"I think it's just what you're thinking."

At Honami's words, Adilisia let out a small breath, and said the name as if shuddering.

"... Glam Sight..."

Chapter 7: Eye of the Magician

In the southwest direction of Danshen Hill, there was small amusement park on the Gate of the Ghosts[1].

It was an amusement park that was run without any interference from the ministry or government. Although it had become a little desolate at this time of the year, but whenever the season suitable for amusement parks came, the amusement park would put up flyers and many families would bring their children to come and play. It would be very noisy.

That night, it was two in the morning.

A couple of people entered the vicinity of the amusement park.

There was a bright moon in the night sky, it was very close to full moon as it was the fourteenth day in the lunar calendar.

Under the moonlight, in a square overlooking the old Ferris wheel, there was a large round magic circle array.

"About the magician who broke the Taboo—Otou-sama's matter, I already know of two things." Adilisia told them:

"Firstly, their movements are limited by the Fey lines. When the previous <Night> ended, it escaped into the fey line, so this proved my point."

Danshen Hill—it had a fey line that came out of the goblin factory, reaching into the middle of the amusement park.

"And another point is—Otou-sama is a failed product of trying to become magic. If he wants to become Solomon's magic, then he has to devour all Seventy-two Demons. Otou-sama is not complete, so if there is the opportunity to gain these demons, Otou-sama will try to come and devour them no matter what, right?"

Following that, Adilisia took out a brass container.

"…Simply said, it also refers to the demons that I inherited from Otou-sama."

The battle plane was very easy.

First, they would summon the remaining demons that Adilisia had.

Then they would draw out the cause of this <Night> — Oswald. Until then, if the <Night> was going to progress as it had the previous time, then they would use Mikan's barrier to isolate him. Then they would leave Oswald who had been lured out, to Nekoyashiki and Honami.

To avoid being detected by Oswald, everyone would hide in the nearby carousel, except for Adilisia.

"Let me say this again, magicians who have become magic are not opponents who we can defeat. Because it controls all the dimensions of magic, they have a different structure from us." Nekoyashiki warned everyone:

"Our target is to ambush him before the demons are absorbed. If the enemy starts to summon demons, then please think of how to escape. The timing of when do we retreat shall be decided by the President."

Anyway, Itsuki was the rear guard and he was to keep an eye on the battle situation.

However, Itsuki was the only person to stay in another location—he was standing on the observation deck of the Ferris wheel some twenty meters away.

They used their hand phones' earpieces and microphones to stay in touch with each other. Because radio waves and magic were different, so this would not affect anything. But Itsuki found it rather profound that the magicians would actually use hand phones to contact each other.

"Huuu—"

Itsuki breathed deeply, hidden on the observation deck.

His heart didn't feel like a part of his body.

Although his breathing was delivering oxygen to all parts of his body from his lungs, but he felt that it was still lacking. Itsuki felt that he had lost his calm, before even talking about whether he was afraid, his body felt like it was disconnected.

"Ah, really, calm down—"

Itsuki tried to persuade himself. Oswald hasn't even appeared yet and you're already so scared?

(Oh yes, this is the first time—)

Itsuki suddenly thought.

In the past, Itsuki was always suddenly dragged off, without anyone telling him what they were about to do. Itsuki had never participated in 'work' of his own will.

So this was his first experience.

This is the first 'work' that he was going to do of his own will as the President of <<Astal>>.

"…"

Calm down, calm down, Iba Itsuki!

His sweaty fists were clenched. Itsuki bit his lip. He hit his face with a soft 'pa'!

"…Alright."

He mentally prepared himself.

He gathered the will power to continue.

Itsuki picked up the binoculars beside him that had a night vision (it seemed to be Nekoyashiki's personal item) and used a weak voice to call Adilisia who was standing in the parade square.

"…That…Can you hear me?"

"There's no problem."

Itsuki's voice made Adilisia who was drawing the magic array nod her head. So that she would not be hindered while drawing the magic array, her earpiece and microphone were extensions.

The brass container was placed in the middle of the magic circle arrary.

– Bael

–Asmodeus

–Astaroth

–Belial

From these containers, four of the seventy-two demons were hidden here. They were the most powerful demons she had. And they were the remaining demons that Adilisia had—even she was unable to summon these demons.

So the demons protecting her now were mini Eligol and the silver chimaera who was swimming in the air in its spiritual body—Forneus.

"That… Can I ask a question? If it's not convenient, you can decline from answering."

"Ask."

Itsuki hesitated for a moment at her prompt.

"Adilisia' father—why did he have to break the Taboo ?"

"There is no reason, because magicians always want that kind of stuff."

"That kind of stuff?"

Itsuki's question make Adilisia chuckle.

"They are a bunch of people who want to be king!"

Her eyes were distant.

"That…what?"

"Otou-sama—Oswald Lenn Mather, was a magician who was proclaimed to be the reincarnated King Solomon by the world."

"Solomon?"

"It is the name of the famous king who ruled Israel three thousand years ago. He is also the ancestor of < Goetia>, he was an amazing magician who led the Seventy-Two Demons."

"He was a person who all magicians aspired to be?"

"Yes, Otou-sama spent all of his life learning about Solomon. He said that as a magician, it also meant that you had to be a king of knowledge. Otou-sama was always learning about the magnificent deeds of King Solomon, always looking after King Solomon's figure, from the broken legends, from the speeches that were left by King Solomon, looking after a rare genius that he would be unable to reach."

Adilisia paused.

The night wind blew gently.

She closed her eyes and continued.

“Otou-sama was always muttering that he was unable to become King Solomon. Even if he was able to control the seventy-two demons, it was only a figment of what King Solomon could use.”

Was this the difference between the genius Mozart and the talented Salieri[2]?

Although he had learnt much, but he understood that he would be unable to catch up with the king who had lived three thousand years ago, learning that his own existence was so tiny.

Although he knew that what he was doing was miniscule in comparison to the king that had existed long ago, but the others called him a reincarnation of that famous king and had high expectations for him, who was actually worthless.

“So… he broke the Taboo because of that?”

"Maybe… No, I think it was definitely because of that."

Adilisia changed her words.

Four months ago, Oswald had carried out a ritual in secret. He had sacrificed his apprentices' bodies as an offering, his own body had been shredded into pieces, this way, Adilisa's father had opened the road to becoming magic.

But…

"Even if this happened, I didn't tell anyone. I will never say that that was a worthless life, even if he had no chance to become the king, there would be no meaning in trying to reach that stage, wouldn't there? Even if it was Otou-sama himself, I would not allow him to say that."

"…"

Ah, so it was like that.

Itsuki could finally understand.

Adilisia's motive in coming to Japan was not because she wanted to bury her father's remains.

It was because she wanted to protect her father's reputation.

"Is that so?"

Itsuki said.

"Then… Eh…"

"Eh?"

"Adilisia-san, behind you!"

She turned around.

A figure had suddenly appeared there.

Up until that moment, she had not felt any magical disturbance, but that body that was distorting the whole world was living, as if it were a vengeful spirit.

A block of mud that had warped into a slightly human shape appeared there.

"I am here. to. eat."

The sludge announced.

"My. cute. Addie"

As if smiling, something equivalent to the sludge's mouth opened.

"Adilisia-san, behind you!"

Itsuki yelled when he saw the sludge appearing on the parade square.

At the same time, the magic in the amusement park started to gather.

There was a sharp pain from his right eye through his eye patch.

"Nekoyashiki-san!"

Itsuki withstood the pain and contacted Nekoyashiki.

"—I know. The timing for the ambush will be decided by President."

"Al…Alright."

Itsuki groaned as he looked into the binoculars.

"Otou-sama."

"You. have. come. at. the. right. time. Cute. Addie."

The sludge said with a hungry tone, it looked behind Adilisia.

It looked at the four remaining pillar demons of Solomon.

"What. is. it."

They were in the brass containers in the magical circle array.

As the sludge asked this, its figure seemed to be more complete than it had been the day before. The roiling mud seemed to be much calmer than yesterday. If it had a cloak and a cap, then it might be able to disguise itself successfully as a human.

But that horrible stench was impossible to hide.

Just by nearing that sludge, there was a rotting smell that made one's innards twist. Only a Fallen human would emanate that kind of rotting stench.

Adilisia spread her arms, as if wanting to block its path.

"I didn't bring the demons here because of you."

She said strongly.

"Oh? Then. why?"

"…These demons are the power."

"Po.wer?"

"The power… to destroy you."

The magic suddenly coalesced.

Following the gathering of the magic, a whirlwind appeared in the middle of the magic circle.

"…I do advocate and conjure thee"

Adilisia said with a calm but determined voice.

"…I do advocate and conjure thee"

She repeated it again in a lower voice, clutching the five pointed star of Solomon in front of her chest.

The grass shook in the wind and the wild white flowers growing outside were blown in, adding a myriad of colours to the whirlwind.

The magic was sucked into the magical circle.

According to Adilisia's intentions, the magic changed to give the demons' their bodies.

"Hu.huhu.hu."

The sludge seemed to laugh happily.

Through the earpiece, Itsuki could hear that laughter.

It seemed as if he could hear something else from the voice that was like a squashed slug.

That kind of tone, was like a father protecting his daughter.

“Hu.huhu.hu.”

– But now.

Itsuki felt chilled.

Now, all of the sludge’s attention was fixed on Adilisia ’a body. Even Itsuki, who was watching from the side was clear about this.

It was about time, Itsuki took another phone.

At this moment—

“Oh. yes.”

The sludge spoke to Adilisia again. It used its torn mouth to say—

“This. is. the. thing. that. you. have been waiting. for, right?”

“—Itsuki! Run!”

Adilisia’s cry sounded through the phone, piercing Itsuki’s ear.

"Eh?"

But Itsuki was still unable to understand.

But the area where he was suddenly darkened, Itsuki looked up.

There was a huge demon that was in the shape of a bird laughing madly, its dirty wings covering the moon.

It was laughing with the same face as the sludge.

"Ah—"

The phone clattered against the floor.

Itsuki tried to escape.

But sharp teeth pierced into his left leg as he tried to escape.

Pssh…Ssha…craack.

There was a strange sound from his ankle, but Itsuki didn't feel any pain. Pain and agony were numbed by terror.

Itsuki dangled from the bird demon as it soared into the night.

"—President?"

The phone that was used for communication suddenly crackled to life.

At the same moment, a silhouette of a large black bird holding on to a boy flew up from the observation deck.

It was Itsuki's silhouette.

Mikan pointed to the sky, her face changing.

"President-onii-san!"

"Eh, Mikan, the reinforcement will be left to you."

Nekoyashiki told her and charged towards the parade square.

Adilisia's summoning was fake. She had been unable to summon those demons even though she had spent a year trying to do so, she couldn't abruptly learn how to summon them.

The most important point was that they attack at this point.

They had to keep Oswald's attention on the demons and grab that chance to attack him.

Since Itsuki had already been attacked, they couldn't allow for any more mistakes in the place. Nekoyashiki had used Mikan's magic to force his presence a mere smidge so that he would not be detected.

He still had fifteen meters to Oswald's back.

Thirteen meters.

Eleven meters.

Nine meters.

Mikan's voice spoke from behind Nekoyashiki's back again.

"I present the God, Tsukuyomi-no-Mikoto with praise of awe, and to the rest of the Divinities who were born from the Cleansing of Izanagi-no-Mikoto—"

Mikan waved her jade beads as she chanted the incantation.

At the same moment, magic was erected inside and outside of the parade square. This was to prevent the << Night>> from happening, it was prepared to let Oswald escape. There was a separation from the fey line and the magic.

"…Wha.at."

As though noticing this, the body made of sludge trembled.

But it was too late.

Seven meters.

Five meters.

"Ji!"

Four vertical lines and five horizontal lines—Nekoyashiki drew the nine-worded mantra that repulsed evil and slapped an amulet in the middle.

The red amulet had the chinese characters '急' written on it with black ink that was like mercury.

This amulet was an amulet that would summon the fires in hell.

The amulet summoned the fires of hell and they flowed towards the body of sludge as if flowing down a volcano.

At the side of the parade square as the sweltering hot magic that was higher than thousands of degrees Celsius was released.

Adilisia saw the tree that was hung in mid-air and immediately, Addie made a choice.

She stopped the summoning ritual and shouted:

“—Come, Forneus! Dominate the Marquis of the Twenty-Nine Legion!”

The silver chimaera that had been waiting in its spiritual body formed and then swam in the air. It immediately approached the black bird and broke its neck.

As Adilisia was about to command Forneus to rescue Itsuki—

In the red hot fire, there was someone who was quicker than her.

An arm stretched out from the sizzling unnaturally red fire.

The arm stretched out—literally.

It was like a snake.

No, that wasn't right.

It was a snake.

It was a bundle of thousands of snakes biting each other and it became a large snake, revealing its fangs to Forneus.

Pssh! The blood of the spirit splattered all over the place. The large snake didn't stop. It continued to eat the scales of the chimaera, its tail, abdomen and it punctured its heart. The blood continued to rain down and the ravaged Forneus became a pile of black snow.

The fire on the parade square was extinguished by the blood rain.

Leaving behind an uninjured human-shaped sludge body. Its arm, which had become a large snake, wriggled as it opened its mouth.

“I’ll. eat. one. first.”

The sludge that had eaten the demon said very happily in a low voice.

Then it moved its arm.

“…Ei!”

“Yaaa!”

Nekoyashiki was sent flying out.

He collided with Mikan and she collapsed too.

When the sludge body retracted its arm, Adilisia discovered that its movements had struck the youth.

The sludge tilted its head unexpectedly.

"Too. weak. Addie."

The sludge seemed to laugh, its shoulders trembling. It was like an emulated human, the sludge's movements made one feel uncomfortable.

"…"

Adilisia moved back slightly.

She was very clear.

Because she used the same Solomon magic, she would understand why the sludge was acting so unnaturally.

Despair clouded her vision black.

He was about seven meters, no, ten metres above the ground?

The chimaera was moving through the air, chasing to the tree where the black bird was.

The chimaera opened its jaws.

"…Eh…"

In the next moment, Itsuki's vision was filled with red.

The chimaera had bitten off the black bird's head.

Of course, Itsuki's body continued to fall.

Bang!!!

His back struck the ground.

"…Wu, eh!"

Itsuki couldn't even cry in pain. When he struck the ground, all his senses had felt pain. If he wasn't landing on the soft soil of the parade square, before Itsuki felt pain, he could have reported to Heaven already.

"Wu…ah…"

Itsuki flipped around and raised his head with much difficulty. Just by doing this, he could feel the pain in his back and neck. Itsuki tolerated it.

Even under this kind of situation, Itsuki's right eye was still watching.

Still watching the sludge that was surrounded with fire and the snake that climbed out of that sludge arm.

(This man…has changed…)

When Nekoyashiki released a fire attack, the sludge's body had changed completely to another form.

Although Itsuki didn't know its name, but it was probably a demon that was resistant to fire, right? It had the appearance of a knight and it resembled Eligol.

When it stuck that arm out of the fire, only the arm changed to mud, then if became a large snake.

(…This is chaotic!)

Itsuki thought.

That person's strength did not only control a large number of demons, but it was able to suit its needs and become the demonic shape that it wanted it to be.

—Controlling a different dimension of magic.

It was like what Nekoyashiki had said.

It was like that.

It was clearly using magic, but it didn't need to chant incantations or do rituals, it didn't need spells or conductors. Even Adilisia had spent a year and half a lunar calendar to summon Eigol and the others, but that monster could summon all of them in a moment.

Because it was magic itself.

Compared to Nekoyashiki and Adilisia who had to start the magic from scratch, it just needed take out something that it had.

What a large difference!

(Can't escape…No…)

There was only this thought resounding in his head as he was unable to think clearly.

From the corner of Itsuki's vision, he could see Adilisa standing there, stunned. She had probably reached the same conclusion as Itsuki, right?

"Sweet.Addie."

The sludge slowly approached Adilisia.

--Rage suddenly poured into him.

(Adilisia will—die--)

"Wu,wuoh--!"

Itsuki used his uninjured leg to stand up.

But in his state, he would not be able to reach them. With this injured leg, he would not be able to catch up to the sludge.

"Adilisa--!"

"..Addie..come.with.me."

Just when the sludge was about to touch Adilisia—

A slim arm reached out from the side and pulled Adilisia away.

"…Honami."

A witch sat on the broom, wearing a pointed hat and carrying Adilisia with one hand.

She faced the sludge with the moon that was in the fourteen day of the lunar calendar and raised her other hand.

“Moon Goddess! I summon you under the full moon! Destroy the calamity in the north with thy breath!”

A mistletoe dart pierced the air.

Honami shot our five darts in a breath and they flew towards the sludge from different directions.

Five big holes were punched in the body of the sludge.

But even so.

“
**Destruction.of.Celtic.magic.cannot.be.compared.to.Solo
’s.”**

The darkness suddenly had a substance to it.

Demons started to form from the sludge’s body and chased after Honami who was escaping.

There were five in total.

"Stop--!"

Itsuki's yell could not be heard.

The five demons who were chasing Honami immediately shot her down.

"Yaa--!"

The faint cry was stopped immediately.

"Stoop--!"

Itsuki trembled, a chilly feeling descended upon his body.

The chilly feeling urged him and Itsuki finally rushed out. He dragged his injured leg and ran forward, his speed decreased by half.

"Honami! Adilisia!"

Then a large body blcked him.

It was one of the Seventy-Two demons, a weak bull that seemed like an accessory.

But this was enough.

“Use.less.”

The bull laughed with Oswald’s voice and charged to Itsuki’s abdomen.

Itsuki flew through the air.

He hit the ground again.

The soil and sharp rocks scratched his skin and Itsuki rolled for a few meters.

He struck the ledge of the garden in the square and there was an ominous sound. Even so, Itsuki tried to stand up. At this moment, his left ankle was twisted in an odd direction.

“…Eeeeaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!”

Itsuki released a scream that he never thought he would let out.

—Ah, I can’t win.

Even if it is a magician, in the end, we’re still human.

But a monster isn't a human.

A human cannot win something that is not human.

This was a simple concept.

Of course, this concept was so natural that no one would blame it.

So humans want to be something not human, that is why something like this is a Taboo.

{That…is magic}

The voice spoke.

Really, that is magic?

Itsuki finally understood. That was right, if that was so irrational, then it couldn't be called magic.

{Is it fine this way?}

The voice spoke again.

--[But, I still feel a little grateful.]

A person's embarrassed voice said.

--[President Onii-san is amazing, amazing!]

She jumped around and clapped her hands.

--[So, you will inherit this company]

She said with an amused voice.

--[You said 'our company', do you have the slight awareness of being a President?]

That wasn't a joke—but talking to him seriously?

"…….How can that…be…good…"

Itsuki told himself even more strongly.

He put his hand to his injured left ankle, and then pushed his joint back. There was the sound of his flesh being squashed, his bones rubbing against each other and the sound of the bone rubbing against meat. Until now, what meaning was there in minding such trivialties ?

(Be angry! Be angry! Iba Itsuki.)

Itsuki stood up.

Itsuki turned his grief and pain into fury, staring at the scary figure of the sludge.

(This…is my 'work')

"Come.give me.Addie."

That person had not regarded the situation around him, but had completely focused his attention on the demons that Addie held. This was a good chance!

"Ah…"

Itsuki panted.

It was hot.

His right eye was very hot.

His right eye was more hot than his left leg, it felt as if his eyeball had become fire. That heat made him feel glad .

"Alright… Come…"

He couldn't stand it and took off his eye patch.

Under his eye patch, was his eye that was not the same black-coloured eye like his left eye.

It was a ruby red—a colour that did not exist in humans—flaming red eye.

"Miaow~"

"Meow~"

The cats licked Nekoyashiki and he opened his eyes.

Although it hadn't been one minute yet, but it seemed as if he had fainted. And in his vision, Nekoyashiki saw something that should not exist.

"…President?"

A gleaming red eye.

It was a ruby red eye that contrasted against the thick magic-polluted air.

Nekoyashiki was so surprised that he was unable to speak.

"Hey, Nekoyashiki-san, get up… eh…President… Onii-chan?"

Mikan who had been his cushion, blinked several times, stunned.

"…"

The youth walked out slowly.

He walked as if he were like a broken marionette, hesitantly, but then he started to walk with a smoother gait. Every time he walked, his blood would drip onto the ground with a plat, plat sound.

Not long after, the sludge noticed him.

"Eat.him."

The sludge seemed to have no interest in the boy, it didn't even turn to the boy when it gave the orders.

A shadow emerged from the sludge and formed a body.

It was that devoured golden lion—Marbas.

Marbas' strong claws aimed at Itsuki and slashed with a stunning speed.

The youth stepped to one side.

It was only that, but suddenly Itsuki was behind the lion.

"Wh.at."

Itsuki passed by the sludge and knelt in front of the two collapsed people.

"—Honami, Adilisia."

He called.

"Honami, get up quickly."

"…Eh…Icchan?"

Ice blue eyes opened slightly.

"…Itsuki."

Adilisia woke up later, her eyes widening.

"Itsuki! Behind you!"

The sludge moved the arm that had become the snake towards Itsuki.

The attack slashed through the air towards the youth.

But Itsuki only tilted his head and the attack missed. He moved as if he had already planned this out, he moved naturally.

"Are the both of you alright?"

He asked, standing up. His left ankle was bleeding again, but as long as it could withstand the next five minutes, it would be fine.

"You.bas.ta.rd."

Itsuki looked back, the sludge was mumbling as it moved.

A few demons appeared.

But those attacks were the same.

No matter which demon, their magic would only move in one direction, those attacks were no different from the clichéd comics or novels.

Itsuki only needed to step away and the attack would pass through the space he had been in earlier.

It was amusing.

You plan to… call that magic?

"Itsuki…"

Adilisia called the name of the youth dazedly.

Even if she was seeing it with her own eyes, she was unable to believe it. She had already asked Honami. Even if it was a talented magician, it was impossible to see the actual body of the magic flow.

–Glam Sight.

It was the legendary magical eye.

It was a fairy tale legend that the magicians had – The Illusion Eyes. Unlike Adilisia or Honami who could see the apparitions, if it was the true Glam Sight, then it was said to be able to see through all apparitions.

It was said that as long as the wielder was looking at it , the Glam Sight would be able to look through all of the happiness, sadness and anger of the apparitions.

But, at the same time, it was said to be danger.

Those pair of eyes that could see too much, would erode away at the spirit of the wielder.

Because of that, magicians who had the Glam Sight often died young. Some of these people become apparitions themselves, but others went on to a sprite's world that was not in the human world.

But…

Was Itsuki's eyes only that?

…Was it only that kind of eyes?

"What.are.you."

The sludge said, its voice wavering for the first time since the battle.

"…"

Itsuki didn't reply.

He only avoided the increasingly vicious blows of the demons and ordered:

"Nekoyashiki, Honami, Mikan, these are the President's orders."

It was the same voice, the same intonations and variation in tone—but the present Itsuki was slightly different.

The three people, as if reacting to Itsuki's order by reflex, didn't hesitate to doubt his order or anything of the sort.

"Nekoyashiki, use your fire amulets and aim to the left by twenty-six degrees and six meters to the front."

The amulets flew from his sleeve. The amulets started to burn again and started burning the demon that was absorbing all the magic.

"Mikan, perform a Cleansing to the front, from forty-two degrees to eighty-four degrees."

She twirled her jade beads and stopped the fire, lightning and curses released by the demons as if she had prepared for it.

"Honami, shoot two mistletoe darts to the upper right corner from sixty-four degrees to seventy-six degrees separately."

The mistletoe darts were released from her soft fingers and the demons who wanted to attack from the sky were struck down by the darts.

It was effortless.

In conclusion, no matter what kind of magic was used, depending on which divinity, all of them were based on the quality of magic and the flow.

If this was so, then he only needed to interpret the flow of the magic, then he would be able to analyze the movements of the demons, their powers and weaknesses.

But, Itsuki's ability was not only this.

(I must see.)

He said silently in his heart.

I must see, I must notice, I must observe.

He had to look to the deepest of the deepest, he had to see the most basic of the foundations, he had to find the interior of what was inside. Without missing anything, without reservation, I have to observe until it is beyond your superficial selves.

Destroy all feelings of terror.

Crush.

Shatter.

Rewrite— this meaningless character!

"Icchan…"

Honami couldn't help but cry.

Itsuki's right eye was bleeding. This was to be expected, the Glam Sight used more energy that the human body had, if it was overused, don't even talk

about being blind, even the nerves and the brain would be damaged. No, even if it was the sight, or brain—even the 'soul' would be damaged.

But even so, Itsuki had no plans to stop.

(There should be…)

Itsuki analyzed the demon's movements and commandeered the members of the company, it was slowly decreasing the sludge—Oswald. Every time a portion was eliminated, the sludge would cry heart-wrenchingly.

"What.are.you."

The sludge asked Itsuki.

(You should definitely have it…)

Itsuki didn't reply, but asked the sludge.

"Oswald--!?"

He asked:

"Do you really want to be magic that much!!?"

He continued:

"You don't treasure your daughter, but make use of her, you eat the lives of your disciples, what kind of Solomon do you want to become!!"

"…!!!"

"Itsuki…!"

Adilisia clasped her hands to her mouth.

They had defeated thirty four of the demons. If they continued, Nekoyashiki's amulets, Honami's darts and Mikan's energy would run out. Compared to that, Itsuki's body had already reached its limit a long time ago.

But even so…

He still wanted to look.

He wanted to look at those things that had existed since the beginning, those things that were clumped together, those things that had completely distorted.

Noticing this, recognizing them as the things that gave the physical shape to the formless body.

--Establish order among the chaos.

Itsuki slowly shortened the distance between him and the sludge. When he reached a distance where he could touch it, the boy raised his right hand.

“Your pride—”

He breathed deeply:

“—Will be repayed by you!”

Itsuki raised out his right hand.

“Wu. Sssh.aa.aa.aaaaa.aaaaaaaaa!”

In a moment, the sludge spread with a splash!

“Icchan!”

Including his hand, the rest of the boy was swallowed by the sludge. No matter how many demons the sludge had lost, it was simple to devour a mere human. Until the last moment, the boy had made a wrong move. At least, that was what the sludge thought.

In reality, it was different.

The change came moments later.

“What.did.you.see.”

The sludge asked.

It wasn’t talking to anyone, but it should have been talking to Itsuki, who had been devoured by it.

“—I saw your—beginning.”

The sludge itself had been a failed product of magic.

It was a failed product that had been trying to imitate Adilisia’s father’s great spirit. So Itsuki had been unable to find its ‘core’. Even after a long time, the ‘core’ wouldn ’t have changed until it was unrecognizable.

“It’s this!”

Itsuki threw himelf and that thing out of the sludge. That thing flew through the air and rebounded two, three times before rolling to Adilisia.

A small red seed.

It was a small sapling that was like frozen blood and growing red thorns.

In that moment, Adilisia's breathing stopped.

"Aaaaa.aaaa.a.aaaaa.aa.a.aa.aaaahhhhh!"

The sludge screamed and lunged towards the girl.

But the sludge met the attack of Nekoyashiki's flames, Honami's mistletoe darts and Mikan's Cleansing barrier.

At last, Adilisia raised up her magical weapon—an athame knife and cut the red seed in half.

"!"

The sludge convulsed.

"Ah…"

Adilisia raised her head.

Even so, the sludge didn't stop moving. The parts of it that were in contact with air started to crumble, the sludge slowly moved closer to the blond girl.

“Cute.Addie.I…”

Then the sludge collapsed in front of the girl.

“Didn’t….become.magic.”

Oswald’s dream to devour the Seventy-Two Demons and become magic had crumbled with the form of sludge .

“Icchan!”

Making sure that the magic had been dealt with, Honami frantically rushed towards Itsuki.

Seeing her rush over desperately, it was hard to remember the usual calm Honami.

Mikan and Nekoyashiki followed slightly later.

Itsuki remained lying on the ground.

“Itsuki!”

Then, Adilisia knelt down and reached out to Itsuki’s face.

Honami also did the same.

Touching the face that was stained with blood from his right eye—the two girls breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed their shoulders.

“……Baka[3]!”

“……Really.”

Itsuki lay on the ground, snoring leisurely.

1. ↑ 巛ˇ ( ) : Refers to the gate opening to the spiritual world. Found in the northwest direction
2. ↑ Antonio Salieri, a Verona-born musician. Born in 1750
3. ↑ Idiot in Japanese

Epilogue

It was the third day after that incident. It was a sunny day.

Itsuki looked at the wide blue sky through his room's window.

On some aspects, Itsuki's appearance made people want to greet him with 'Hi, mummy'. The doctor had said that he would need two weeks to fully recover, but from Itsuki's external appearance, it seemed that if he said that he needed to spend ten times of that time to recover, everyone would believe him. Itsuki's body was completely injured from his fall from eight meters high; he had internal injuries from being attacked by the bull; and he had a large number of scratches, abrasions and cuts on him because he had not been able to avoid all of the magical attacks.

And as for the last blow, his left leg was encased tightly in a cast.

Although it was bad that he had still moved around when he had broke a bone, but there were a few places where his muscles had ruptures, the doctors and nurses were shocked just by looking at it.

Also, although Itsuki was in a personal hospital room, but because of the company's budget, he would be moving into a hospital room shared by four people. This made one feel uneasy about the financial situation in < Astal>.

"…Eh~"

"What's wrong, President-Onii-san?"

Mikan tilted her head, slightly surprised. There was a red bag beside her, Mikan had just came from her primary school.

"No, I was just thinking, why is the sky so blue, but my whole body is injured?"

It was like a philosophy question.

Although Itsuki could still remember the memories of fighting with the sludge, but his sense of reality was

weak. Or he should say, the memory was becoming faint ?

That memory about this right eye.

Itsuki learnt of the phrase Glam Sight after the incident , when Honami had told him. But even if he tried to think about it, he didn't feel that he had done anything special.

(No, I should say- how should I say it- this makes me feel nostalgic…)

Itsuki thought dazedly.

"President?"

Honami narrowed her eyes as she sliced an apple.

"If you go into a daze too often, we'll think that your brain was injured!"

"This, isn't this too unfair?"

"It's not unfair."

After answering oddly, Honami asked with a slight hoarse voice:

"Does your head still ache?"

"Eh?...Ah, it doesn't matter now."

Itsuki had felt as if someone was hitting his head violently with a pole for the whole day yesterday, but his headache had diminished this morning.

According to Nekoyashiki's diagnosis, it could be because he had overused his magic eyes.

'Seeing' didn't only involve the eyes. Since the brain was the site where information was gathered and organized, then 'seeing something that cannot be seen' would damage the brain.

Itsuki seemed to understand this explanation, but also seemed not to understand. Anyway, the right eye under his eye patch was bandaged now. The after effects of doing rash things still resided in Itsuki's body.

"…Really?"

"Eh."

Honami's ice blue eyes flashed sharply.

"This means that it's about time that you continue working hard, right?"

"Eh?"

Bang.

Honami pulled out a large amount of files and reference books from her bag and piled them on the table . No, he watched the files multiply and the reference books increase, Itsuki seemed to be surrounded by things that could potentially suffocate him.

"Wa, that's amazing."

Mikan spoke honestly.

Honami smiled a witch's smile, looking at Itsuki.

"Because of 'work', President's progress in studying has fallen back. We have to remedy that during your stay in hospital."

"My, my head still seems to ache…"

Itsuki's face twitched and his body seemed to waver.

At this moment, there was a knock on the door.

"Ah, I'll get it."

Mikan raised her hand energetically.

But the door opened suddenly.

"Aiya, Mikan and Honami are here?"

In the white corridor of the hospital, a girl wearing a black western outfit stood there—Adilisia Lenn Mathers was carrying an adorable bouquet of flowers.

"Adilisia-san."

"Good afternoon, Itsuki. I'm glad to see that you're as energetic as before. I thought you would be abused by the witch, so I was quite frantic!"

"Hey, who are you talking about?"

Honami glared. Wuah, her cold eyes were much more powerful than the real magical eyes.

Looking at Honami who continued to cut the apple, Adilisia replied.

"…You, wait, the two of you! Aren't you here to pay a visit?"

Itsuki frantically tried to stop the potential war from blooming between the two girls. Just by watching them, his heart felt as if it was about to explode.

Adilisia shrugged and put the flowers in the flower vase in the room.

"Forget it, it's fine—if I remember Honami's face when I return to my country, I will not stand for that."

"Ah, are you going back?"

Itsuki's words made Adilisia lower her head slightly.

"Eh, because Otou-sama's matters have been dealt with. I have collected a part of the spiritual bodies of the demons it ate, as time passes, I can let them come to life again."

After that, it seemed as if the re-energized members of <Astal> had cleansed the spell-polluted site. Did they collect back the spirit bodies of the demons then?

Itsuki sighed and smiled.

"…Is that so, then I'll temporarily say good bye to Adilisia-san here."

"Ai ya, I'll be returning to Japan next week."

Adilisia snorted as she told him.

"!!!"

Honami seemed to be shocked and withheld her breath.

For unknown reasons, even Mikan did so.

"Eh, next week?"

"Of course. Unless, Itsuki feels that it is better that I don't return?"

"Ah, no, I didn't think that."

Itsuki waved his bandaged hand and Adilisia smiled.

She quickly reached out and stroked his short hair—then the blond girl pressed her lips to the boy's temple.

"…"

"…"

"…"

The air froze. No, to the other three people apart from Adilisia, time had stopped.

"Itsuki."

Adilisia stroked Itsuki's cheek and eye patch adoringly , departing with this whisper:

"About Otou-sama's affairs, thank you."

Not long after.

Adilisia reached the lounge of the hospital and looked at a person among the patient and visiting patients.

“Kagezaki.”

“Ai ya, isn’t this Adilisia-san? How coincidental.”

On Kagezaki’s normal features, there was a warm smile that seemed nothing out of ordinary.

The magician of the sanctioned magicians—Kagezaki bowed.

“I wanted to visit President Iba, but I was rejected by Nekoyashiki-san, what a pity.”

“…”

Adilisia did not reply.

Instead, she asked:

“How much do you know about Itsuki?”

"No, I don't know anything."

Kagezaki shook his head.

"He is the heir of Tsukasa Iba—a magician who cannot use magic. I only know that much, the rest of them is work from the <Organisation>."

"I can't trust you."

Adilisia stared at her opponent after refusing his answer.

"I'll say this first, if you plan to harm Itsuki Iba, < Goetia> will not remain silent. Please remember this."

"Yes, I will remember that."

Kagezaki smiled faintly.

At the same time, in the hospital room.

"—President, what are you thinking, forming such close ties with the leader of the enemy organization?"

"President-Onii-san! Although I don't really understand, you can't be too flirtatious!"

Itsuki suffered under the barrage of questions from the two people.

"No… even if you ask me of my intentions, I… and why flirtatious?"

Even if he was sweating or blinking ferociously, Itsuki tried to express his troubled feelings with his restrained body.

Ai ya, although he thought that her lips were very soft and felt very comfortable and other similar thoughts.

At this moment…

"Miaow~"

"Miao~"

"Meow~"

"Eh, what is this, President? I just walked past Adilisia-san!"

Nekoyashiki entered the room with his cats that were supposed to be prohibited by the hospital.

"Nekoyashiki-san, save, save me!"

"Ah? Save you?"

The grey-haired youth entered his thoughts for a moment, then clapped his palms together.

"Ah, I see, it seems pretty interesting. Come, Suzaku, Byakko, Genbu, Sohryu, deal the naughty President with his deserved punishment!"

"Miaow miaow miaow miaow!"

After receiving Nekoyashiki's approval, the four cats bravely attacked him. Each cat's eyes were gleaming with mischief.

"Tr-traitor~"

And so…

In the small room, there were cries of someone who did not sound like a magician and happy laughter.

Author's Word

I can't forget that night in July. It was when I received the draft for <Rental Magica>, because I fell asleep ecstatic about the beautiful drawings. Then when I opened my eyes, my body…

"Ca-can't move? I can't even move a finger!"

This was the first time I had this experience of a ' supernatural' case of being pressed down by a phenomenal nature. I couldn't help but laugh sinisterly. There is a saying: Writers of horror stories and games will encounter phenomenal activities. Doesn't this mean that <Rental Magica> will definitely succeed!

But the situation was a little strange. How do I say this , there was an odd feeling from my abdomen…

…This…Unless…It couldn't be… I was only hungry…

Eh, this mean that, I forgot to eat because I was eagerly researching.

Although this volume of <Rental Magica> is about a President who has just entered high school and his companions who are magicians, but because this work

has used many magical systems, so the information load is quite large.

No matter if it is the Solomon magic or magic books that Adilisia has, the Celtic magic that Homani uses and the changes in Druid, the magical society has been born in this era and has spread… In the end, I had to transverse past the reference room to get to the kitchen. If I did so, I wouldn't receive any retribution, would I? (Laugh)

I'm sorry, I've only greeted the fellow readers this late. I am Sanda Makoto, not Mita Makoto, but Sanda Makoto, please treat me well.

Although I have just greeted everyone, but the editor-in-charge has given me a strict warning: there are no more pages, so even if we alter, there are only eight lines left! So I can't continue writing. As a side note, I will mention my editor's name in this short author's word because the editor said: I want to brag to the kids, so put my name in the author's note. This is an amazing sentence. Is this alright? (Laugh)

Then, lastly—I hope that by picking this book up, < Rental Magica> will be a story that can bring happiness to you.

Let's meet in the next volume!

Year: 2004, August

Written when preparing to move house but escaped reality by reading <The Chronicles of Narnia>.

Translator's Notes and References